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HIS BOOK

MOLLENTRAVE ON WOMEN

A Comedy in Three Acts

BY

ALFRED SUTRO

AUTHOR OF "THE WALLS OF JERICHO," "A MARRIAGE HAS BEEN ARRANGED," "A MAKER OF MEN," "THE GUTTER OF TIME," "A GAME OF CHESS," "MR. STEINMANN'S CORNER," "CARROTS."

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The following is a copy of the original programme :

ST. JAMES THEATRE

KING STREET, S.W.

Monday, February 13th, 1905.

THIS EVENING AT 9

WILL BE ACTED

MOLLENTRAVE ON WOMEN

A New and Original Comedy in Three Acts

By ALFRED SUTRO.

"I wish it to be distinctly understood that, my scientific investigations notwithstanding, I still regard woman as an amiable creature."
(MOLLENTRAVE ON WOMEN: *Introduction.*)

Mr. Mollentrave.....	MR. ERIC LEWIS.
Sir Joseph Balsted, K.C., M.P.	MR. NORMAN MCKINNEL.
Everard Swenboys.....	MR. LESLIE FABER.
Lord Contareen.....	MR. ROBERT HORTON.
Mr. Dexter.....	MR. E. VIVIAN REYNOLDS.
Mr. Noyes.....	MR. GERALD JEROME.
Peters.....	MR. E. H. BROOKE.
Martin.....	MR. MURRAY CARRINGTON.
Lady Claude Derenham.....	MISS MARION TERRY.
Margaret Messilent.....	MISS LETTICE FAIRFAX.
Miss Treable.....	MISS NORA GREENLAW.
Mrs. Martelli.....	MRS. KEMMIS.

ACT I.—Study in Sir Joseph Balsted's House.
ACT II.—Drawing-room in Mr. Mollentrave's House.
ACT III.—Garden of Mr. Mollentrave's House at Swanage.

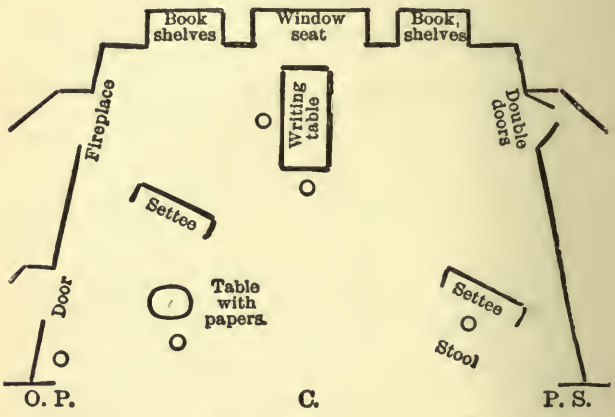
TIME—The Present.

572674

ACT I.

Time of Representation, forty minutes.

SCENE.



HAND PROPS.

Book (Mollentrave on Women).
Bag (for Noyes).
Flowers (Everard).
Photographs on Mantelpiece.

MOLLENTRAVE ON WOMEN.

ACT. I.

SIR JOSEPH BALSTED'S *study, in his house in Hans Place.*

MISS TREABLE, MARGARET'S *companion, a faded lady of uncertain age, is fingering the photograph on the mantelpiece* R. MRS. MARTELLI, *the housekeeper, a grim-faced, elderly woman, dressed in stiff black silk, opens the door and enters* L. 3 E. MISS TREABLE, *absorbed in a photograph she holds in her hand, does not notice her.* MRS. MARTELLI *coughs emphatically.*

MISS TRE. (*coming* C. *turning*) Oh!....Dear Mrs. Martelli, do you know who this is?

MRS. MAR. (C. *shortly*) Sir Joseph's sister.

MISS TRE. What an angelic face! The outline so pure. Such heavenly eyes. (*returns* R. *and puts frame back*)

MRS. MAR. (C.) She was marked with small-pox, and had a pronounced squint.

MISS TRE. (*disconcerted*) Ah! I have noticed these photographs before. I have a passion for photographs. This one—? (*coming* C.—*she takes up another*)

MRS. MAR. (*takes photo from* MISS TRE.) Sir

Joseph's mother. The other ladies are his cousin, his aunt by marriage, and—me. (MISS TRE. *goes* R.)

MISS TRE. (*with surprise*) You!

MRS. MAR. (*with dignity*) My late husband, Captain Martelli, of his Majesty's Indian army, was a friend of Sir Joseph's (C.). I trust you find nothing remarkable in his widow's photograph reposing on Sir Joseph's mantelpiece?

MISS TRE. (*comes down* R. *and sits* R. C. *chair*) Oh, not at all, not at all...My father was Canon Treable—he preached before the Queen.

MRS. MAR. (*puts photo back* R. *and comes down* R. C.) So I have frequently heard. But I admit it is a theme on which one cannot dwell too often. None the less I consider it my duty, as Sir Joseph's housekeeper, to inform Canon Treable's daughter that this room is, as it were, consecrated to Sir Joseph.

(MISS TRE. *rises and crosses* L. *and sits on stool.*)

And that it is his wish, his formally expressed instruction, that none but myself should enter it.

MISS TRE. Oh!

MRS. MAR. (*to desk* C.) I allow no housemaid here—I dust it myself. Sir Joseph, in common with most legal gentlemen, is partial to dust, but I control his partiality. So you understand—(*down* C.)

MISS TRE. But the Courts have risen to-day, dear Mrs. Martelli! The Long Vacation, they call it, do they not? For nigh on three months Sir Joseph ceases to be the brilliant advocate; Parliament is not sitting, so the House will not hear his inspired accents—

MRS. MAT. My accents may be less inspired, but they rest on authority; and I beg you to heed them. This room is private.

MISS TRE. (*sweetly*) I can quite understand that, to the servants, it is a sanctuary.

MRS. MAR. To the servants, and the upper servants, Miss Treable. You and I are both upper servants.

MISS TRE. (*rise, indignantly*) Mrs. Martelli! This is intolerable. I am dear Margaret's companion— (*sit on stool* L. C.) her trusted friend—

MRS. MAR. At so much per annum, paid quarterly. Sir Joseph has confided the government of his household to me.

MISS TRE. (*proudly*) I am not a member of your household, madam! I take orders from Sir Joseph alone—and then they come in form of requests!

MRS. MAR. You compel me, therefore, to inform Sir Joseph of your truculent attitude—and demand your dismissal.

MISS TRE. (*rise*) Dismissal!

MRS. MAR. It would of course be within my province to dismiss you myself—

MISS TRE. (*up to her* C.) Insolent!

MRS. MAR. But I shall leave that disagreeable duty to Sir Joseph; and I have no doubt that it will come, as you say, in the form of a request. I have the honour to wish you good morning.

(EXIT. L. 1 E.)

(MISS TREABLE *sinks on the sofa* R. C. *and sobs.* EVERARD *comes in from back* L. 3 E., *a good-looking youngster of* 25.)

EVERARD. (R. C.) Why, Treaby, what's the matter?

MISS TRE. (*stamping her foot*) How dare you call me Treaby!

EVERARD. Oh, I beg your pardon—but Margaret always does.

MISS TRE. Am I to be forever insulted in this house? First by a wretched servant—then by a mere boy!

EVERARD. A boy—hang it! I shall be a full-fledged doctor soon. But I apologise—there! And Martelli's a hedgehog. Leave off sobbing (*over back of settee*) do!

MISS TRE. (*through her tears*) I will tell Sir Joseph he must choose between her—and me!

EVERARD. She's an awful Tartar—I wonder my uncle puts up with her. But come now, dear Miss — Evangeline—

MISS TRE. (*coyly*) Mr. Swenboys?

EVERARD. (*eagerly*) Did you give Margaret those verses?

MISS TRE. I did.

EVERARD. (*excited, away* R. C.) Well? Well?

MISS TRE. She—laughed.

EVERARD. (*aghast*) Laughed!

MISS TRE. But really—why did you steal them from Swinburne?

EVERARD. (*comes* C.) The devil! She spotted it?

MISS TRE. Naturally. She adores Swinburne.

EVERARD. I altered a word or two—I did, I swear. And of course poetry's not in my line. But I didn't think girls were allowed to read Swinburne!

MISS TRE. An old-fashioned prejudice. To-day we throw open the whole book of life.

EVERARD. I didn't know! (*returning to back of settee* R. C.) But—Miss Treable—you're my friend, aren't you? You'll help me?

MISS TRE. I am always on the side of love.

EVERARD. Have I a chance, do you think? A millionth part of a chance?

MISS TRE. You never speak to her!

EVERARD. How can I? She's too—magnificent—she dazzles me! Her eyes scorch me—I become

idiotic! I can talk, as a rule, I've something to say—but not to her, not to her! Although Martelli thinks—

MISS TRE. Martelli! That hateful name! Oh!

(*Her sobs begin again.* MARGARET *enters from back* L. 3 E.: *she pauses shyly at seeing* EVERARD.)

MARGARET. (C.) Oh Everard! Have you got the flowers—the white roses?

EVERARD. Yes, here they are. (*up* L. C.)

MARGARET. How good of you. (*turning to* MISS TREABLE, (*and throwing her arms round her*) What, dearest Treaby! Crying!—(*cross* R. C.)

EVERARD. (*coming* C.) Martelli has upset her.

MARGARET. Again! Oh, the wretch! How I wish that my guardian would send her away! (R. C.)

EVERARD. You have only to—to—to ask! Could he—is there a man who—who could—anything, anything, Margaret! Oh!

(*He flies, overcome with confusion, and* EXIT *back* L. 3 E.)

MARGARET. Poor Everard! (*she gazes pensively after him for a moment—then turns to* MISS TREABLE *again*) Do not cry! I will speak to Sir Joseph; he shall see that this woman makes me unhappy.

MISS TRE. (*drying her eyes*) Dearest Margaret!

MARGARET (*looking around—sitting chair* C.) Oh, how my heart beats when I find myself in his room!

MISS TRE. He is the grandest, greatest of men—

MARGARET. In this morning's paper they men-

tion his name three times. And they've his portrait in the Sketch!

MISS TRE. And so like him!

MARGARET. His speech in that copyright case yesterday! His triumph!

MISS TRE. I felt you quiver as you sat beside me—

MARGARET. He saw us there, I think...As his eye swept past, I noticed a tremble in his voice. And, after that, I felt that he was speaking—for me!

MISS TRE. His peroration was sublime.

MARGARET. (*rise, down* R. C. *and sit in chair*) It was odious of that old man's daughter to thank him so effusively. I detest Lady Claude!

MISS TRE. (*rising and* R. C.) Jealous, my Margaret? They knew each other, in the long ago. I have an idea that he once—but he has not her photograph! I came here to see!

MARGARET. It is not on the mantelpiece.

MISS TRE. Nor in his desk. I looked!

MARGARET. Oh! You should not have done that!

MISS TRE. There is no limit to my devotion. It is true Lady Claude is handsome.

MARGARET. (*indignantly*) Handsome! A widow—and old! Why, she's thirty-five, at least!

MISS TRE. (*tartly away* L.) My age, Margaret!

MARGARET. (*rise and across to her*) Ah, dear Treaby, forgive me! But—when I am here—in his room—and think of—a possible rival! (*up to desk* C.) Here, where he sits, and works! Every day I steal in, and let fall a flower. I love to think of him kissing that flower, perhaps—who knows, wearing it next his heart! If he only would speak to me! Little girl, he calls me, then turns his eyes timidly away. Little girl! Oh never did lover's epithet sound so sweet!

(*Since having the flowers* MARGARET *has been undoing them and dropping them about the room.*)

MISS TRE. (*sit on settee* L.) I have seen him, when your name was mentioned, change colour, and murmur something beneath his breath.

MARGARET. (*sit on stool* L.) What was it? Oh, what?

MISS TRE. Nay, I could not catch. But Margaret, tell me—Everard has been imploring—

MARGARET. (*softly*) Ah, poor Everard! It was not till you opened my eyes, dear Treaby, that I—of course I am fond of Everard—oh, very fond! But—can I hesitate! Between a boy—and a great man—a leader of men! Dear Treaby, (*rise and up* C.) I beseech you—leave me here, for a moment!

MISS TRE. (*rise and up* L. C.) I go, dear child, I go—I feel that my eyes are red—I must wash away these tears. Plead for me with your guardian, Margaret—rid us of the hateful Martelli!

MARGARET. (*round to* L. C. *and embracing* MISS TRE.) I will try—oh, I will try!

(MISS TREABLE *kisses her devotedly and goes* L. 3 E. MARGARET, *after a glance round the room, to make sure she is unobserved, takes a rose, kisses it, and lays it on* SIR JOSEPH'S *desk—up* C. R. *of desk.*)

Speak for me, rose, and tell him of my love! Lie fondly on his heart, dear rose!

(SIR JOSEPH'S *voice is heard outside, talking to* MRS. MAR. MARGARET *starts and retreats to down* C. SIR JOSEPH *enters from* R. *talking to* MRS. MARTELLI.)

SIR J. (R. C.) Come, come, Mrs. Martelli, she didn't mean anything! She couldn't have, you

know! (*he sees* MARGARET) Ah, little girl, you there? Er—er—Mrs. Martelli and I—

MARGARET. (C.) I go, guardian, I go! But—one word—for poor Miss Treable. She is the only friend I have in the world!

(*She goes out* L. 3 E.)

SIR J. (C.) There, you hear that? The only friend she has in the world! Now, can I send her away? (*up to desk and sitting*) I put it to you!

MRS. MAR. (*grimly*) Every companion Miss Messilent has had has been her only friend. And let the lady stay by all means, Sir Joseph. (R. C.) Only you will permit me to take my departure.

SIR J. (*very annoyed, sitting at his desk, taking up the rose and dropping it in the waste-paper basket*) I wish that girl wouldn't let her confounded flowers trail all over the place! Why does she come in here? Can't I have one room in the house to myself?

MISS MAR. (*picking up flowers which* MARGARET *has dropped*) That was precisely the cause of my altercation with Miss Treable, Sir Joseph. I found her inspecting the photographs on the mantelpiece.

SIR J. Confound her impudence! I'll say a word to her. We'd better keep the door locked in future, eh?

MRS. MAR. (R. C. *adamant*) You will have to choose, Sir Joseph, between Miss Treable and me.

SIR J. (*wheedling, rise and down* R. C.) Come, come, Mrs. Martelli, you and I have been together too long to allow a trifle like this to part us. Besides, we're all going off in a day or two—Miss Treable may get married in the Long Vacation—

MRS. M. Married—she! She'll never see forty again!

SIR J. Won't she, though? Well, after all,

that's no concern of mine. *I* don't want her to see forty again—for the matter of that I don't want to see *her* again. But she's the girl's companion—and the girl must have a companion—and if the Treable woman goes I shall have to find another companion. That's so, isn't it?

MRS. MAR. (*still adamant*) Sir Joseph—

SIR J. And I want to be off to Scotland tomorrow! Come, come, Mrs. Martelli—

MRS. MAR. Sir Joseph, that person has made use of certain expressions to me that render further residence with her under the same roof impossible. I regret it—for my dear husband's sake, I regret it. But you will have to choose.

(*She goes* R. I. E. *with majesty.* SIR JOSEPH *is exceedingly vexed. He pishes and pshaws, seizes his blotting pad, hurls it to the other end of the room, then goes and fetches it—then takes up paper* R. *and reads, swearing softly to himself.* PETERS *the butler,* ENTERS L. 3 E.)

PETERS. (*up* L. C.) Mr. Mollentrave and Lady Claude Derenham have called, Sir Joseph.

SIR J. (*puts paper down eagerly,* R. C.) Ah, I'll go down. They're in the drawing-room, I suppose?

PETERS. (*up* L. C.) No, Sir Joseph—Miss Messilent and Miss Treable are playing a duet in the drawing-room—

SIR. J. (*discontentedly*) Ah—in the library, then?

PETERS. No, Sir Joseph—Mr. Swenboys is smoking a pipe in the library—

SIR J. (*furious*) Not a room in my house! Where in Heaven's name are they?

PETERS. In the dining-room, Sir Joseph.

SIR J. (*stamping his foot*) The dining-room! Bring them up here, Peters—quick!

(PETERS *goes* L. 3 E. SIR JOSEPH *goes to glass* R. *and arranges tie, etc.* PETERS *returns with* MR. MOLLENTRAVE *and* LADY CLAUDE. MOLLENTRAVE *is a very old man, with masses of snow-white hair; notwithstanding his age, he is alert and agile, with no trace of feebleness.* LADY CLAUDE *is a beautiful and fascinating woman.* LADY C. ENTERS, *shakes hands with* SIR J. C., *and gets away* L. C. *as* MOLLEN. ENTERS.)

MOLLEN. (*with outstretched hands*—C.) My dear Balsted! Forgive this intrusion. But I had to come and congratulate you again on the way you conducted my case. You were masterly! Masterly.

SIR. J. (C.) You are very good, Mr. Mollentrave. Our copyright law is intricate. (MOL. *crosses behind* SIR J. *to* R. *and undoes book*) It was a very nice point (*he shakes hands with* LADY CLAUDE) And you, Lady Claude, are you pleased?

MOLLEN. (R. C.) Need you ask, when my book was in question! Rosamund is naturally proud of her father's work!

LADY C. (L. C.) And I am especially glad of the opportunity the case has given me of renewing an ancient friendship.

SIR J. (C.) Yes—we are very old friends, you and I! You have been abroad a long time?

LADY C. Yes—in Italy—since my husband's death.

SIR J. I trust you have now returned for good?

MOLLEN. (*comes* C. *a step*) I don't mean to part with her any more, Balsted! Italian cypresses may set off a widow's weeds—but now, that two years have passed! (LADY C. *sits on stool. He produces a book*) Balsted, I have taken the liberty to bring you my book—the *casus*

belli—with an autograph inscription. (C. *he presents it with a flourish*) Allow me to offer it to you!

SIR J. (*taking it*) I am very much obliged.

MOLLEN. (R. C. *rubbing his hands*) "Mollentrave on Women!" I venture to say it is in a fair way to become a classic.

LADY C. (*smiling*) He has given away all our secrets!

MOLLEN. I was an observer from boyhood. Like Dante, I fell in love at the age of nine. Unlike Dante, I made notes. In the interests of my self-imposed study I married three times. (*by chair* R.) In short, you will find, between these covers, a most careful, complete investigation on scientific principles, of the baffling, perplexing creature known to us as WOMAN!

LADY C. (*in smiling protest*) Papa!

MOLLEN. (*comes* C. *a step*) Your pardon, my child! You are, of course, the topmost blossom of the spreading tree. You have inherited, if I may say so, my mental energy.

SIR J. (C. *fingering the book*) I am disappointed that Lady Claude's photograph does not figure as frontispiece.

MOLLEN. Ha, ha, very good! (*away* R. *and returning*) But—in all seriousness (*takes book*), Balsted—it is a guide, a hand-book, a Baedeker! It conducts you personally to the most hidden recesses of the feminine heart, opens every door, strips every cupboard! (R. C.) No marriage license should be issued to the man who cannot pass his examination in Mollentrave! (*Goes* R. *to table and puts book down*) As a result there would be cobwebs in the Divorce Court! You practise there, by the way?

SIR J. Heaven forbid! No—I am on the Chancery side—

MOLLEN. (C.) Ah—that's a pity—I should

have valued expert criticism. I am at present revising the book for its next edition—which will be the twenty-third!

SIR J. (C. *on his* L.) The twenty-third? Really!

MOLLEN. My dear sir, the work has been translated into every living tongue. I am told there are women's clubs where it is the custom solemnly to execrate me after dinner. In Dover Street "to be mollentraved" has passed into the language. It means—to be found out!

LADY C. (*rising*) Papa, we must not take up Sir Joseph's time.

SIR J. On the contrary! And my interviews with you have been too brief, these many years past, for me to desire to curtail them. Besides, I find myself to-day in a position of some perplexity—and truly, should value your advice!

LADY C. (*archly*) Mine—or papa's?

SIR J. Both! Please sit down. Will you listen to my tale of woe?

(LADY C. *sits settee* L.)

MOLLEN. Gladly. It is the least we can do for you, after your magnificent service. (MOL. *gets chair* R. C. *and sits*)

(*They sit.*)

SIR J. (*sits up* C. *front of desk*) Well then, here goes! As you are aware, I am unmarried. Many years ago (*he looks at* LADY CLAUDE *who drops her eyes*) I loved a lady, who, very wisely, preferred another. (MOLLENTRAVE *points waggishly to the book*) Ah, Mr. Mollentrave, had I then been able to consult your work!

MOLLEN. I was labouring at it for twenty years before I gave it to the world.

SIR J. My misfortune to have been born too

soon! Well, I settled down to single blessedness, and worked hard. My existence was tranquil. An elderly lady, widow of a man I had known, kept house for me, and left me undisturbed. My life was all work, with an occasional game at bridge. I had never been a....lady's man.... the sex did not—let us say, appreciate me—and I, while admiring them from a distance, have avoided their closer neighborhood.

MOLLEN. My dear friend, you have denied yourself one of the most fruitful sources of amusement!

SIR J. That may be, but I am constitutionally shy. And law and politics, you see, took up all my time—I settled down—contentedly enough, into old fogeydom, My one care was a nephew, a good lad, who walked the hospitals and has just passed his final exam. Well, so far all was untroubled. But now comes the catastrophe. A year ago an old friend of mine died in Australia —a companion of my boyhood—and bequeathed me—his daughter!

MOLLEN. (*alert*) Ah!

SIR J. His motherless daughter! I received her letter by the morning's post—she came in the afternoon! A girl! Imagine it! My austere dwelling invaded by a bouncing, flouncing girl!

MOLLEN. (*chuckling*) Terrible!

SIR J. It *was* terrible. Lady Claude will excuse me—

LADY C. (*smiling*) Oh yes!

SIR J. My feelings at that moment could only be expressed in camera. There was no way out —he had appointed me her guardian—it was a sacred trust—I could do nothing. (*rise*) She was too old to send to school—too young to live alone. And here was I, to whom girls are esoteric, mysterious things, of strange, uncanny ways —I, who don't know what to say to them, how to

feed them or amuse them, I who go into no society, have no small-talk, don't dance or play ping-pong—here was I suddenly overwhelmed by this avalanche of laces and muslins!

MOLLEN. Heaven sent you a full-grown daughter, without the expensive preliminaries!

SIR J. Let us hope Heaven meant it kindly—but there are occasions, doubtless, when even Providence nods! Well, after a considerable struggle with myself, I accepted the inevitable. I moved from my comfortable bachelor's quarters, took this house, found her a companion—who at once proceeded to quarrel with the housekeeper. I had to dismiss her and engage another—the same story! (*sits on settee* L. *by* LADY C.) In twelve months I have had five companions. To-day another disturbance—for the sixth time I am bidden choose between them—and I had hoped to go to Scotland to-morrow. This may all sound very trivial—but truly I'm in despair!

LADY C. (*laughing*) Poor Sir Joseph!

MOLLEN. (*rise and go* L. C. *Earnestly*) My dear child, I can enter into our friend's feelings—this is no laughing matter!—Tell me now, Balsted—what is she like, your ward?

SIR J. (*puzzled*) Like? Like all other girls, I imagine. I scarcely have looked at her. Pretty, I suppose, in a feeble kind of way. I have said good morning and good evening, taken her to an occasional theatre, and allowed her to prattle. She is only a child.

MOLLEN. (*quickly*) A mistake! They *never* are children!—How old is she?

SIR J. Eighteen, I believe—or nineteen, perhaps—possibly twenty.

MOLLEN. Of the sentimental order?

SIR J. (*laughing*) Truly, I've no idea!

MOLLEN. At least you can tell me her taste in literature?

SIR. J. (*searching in his memory*) Literature? She reads a good deal—though what, I've no notion. Stay, though—I remember, one night when I couldn't sleep, taking a book of hers upstairs, and having a superb night's rest. It was Somebody's Love-Letters.

LADY C. The Englishwoman's?

SIR J. Yes. That was it.

MOLLEN. Good. Were passages marked?

SIR J. The pages were peppered with lines and crosses.

MOLLEN. The boards protected with a cover?

SIR J. I rather imagine they were.

MOLLEN. Notes scribbled on the margin?

SIR J. I fancy so—yes, I am sure! Heaps of 'em!

MOLLEN. Clue No. 1. Perfect. (*triumphant*) In her clothing she will affect the darker shades?

SIR J. (*with an effort at memory*) Er—yes—

MOLLEN. Fond of flowers?

SIR J. She litters the place with them!

MOLLEN. I have her! Devours poetry, of course? Adores Wagner? Appetite languid, member of the Stage Society, and worships Ibsen?

SIR J. The name's familiar—I've heard her mention it—

MOLLEN. Of course! My dear fellow, I haven't seen the lady—and I prefer, as a rule, to visit the patient before pronouncing upon her case. But here all is simple, and there is no further need of analysis. She belongs to the large class, known as *Invertebrate Sentimentalists.* (*away* R. C.)

SIR J. (*rise and go* C.) The deuce she does!

MOLLEN. Harmless, my dear fellow—quite harmless! Now tell me—your nephew?

SIR J. Yes?

MOLLEN, Has he been here all the time?

SIR J. The last month only—he studied in Germany.

MOLLEN. Good. A normal, healthy lad?

SIR J. Quite.

MOLLEN. Age?

SIR J. Twenty-four or twenty-five.

MOLLEN. A little melancholy lately?

SIR J. Ah! The fact is. I *have* noticed—

MOLLEN. With the quickness of the trained advocate you have guessed my drift! My dear sir, your troubles are at an end. To restore your tranquillity, all you need do is to—add the ward to the nephew!

SIR J. (*gleefully*) By Jove! I should never have thought of it!

MOLLEN. That is where *I* come in. You talked of a will—she has money?

SIR J. Ten thousand pounds.

MOLLEN. Admirable. Now listen—

(LADY C. *rises and goes up* L. C.)

MOLLEN. (*sit in chair* R. C. *down stage*) It will take you exactly ten minutes. You will send for your nephew—meet him coldly—wave him to a chair. A set frown on your face. You will tell him severely you have detected his secret, (SIR J. *sits* C.) remarked his passion for your ward. You will upbraid him—remember, his adoration is certain! He will confess and beat his bosom. Then you melt—and send for the maiden.

SIR J. (*alarmed*) I? I speak to her? Never!

MOLLEN. In the interests of celerity! If you leave it to him he will bungle it. He will be abject, and she tyrannical. She will say "no" for certain, to see how he takes it. She will demand time—in short, there will be delay. You will find all this set down in my fourteenth chapter, called "The Cat and the Mouse."

SIR J. (*rise and down stage*) I can't do it, Mollentrave. I shouldn't know what to say!

MOLLEN. (*rise, put chair back* R.) You, the great orator! Imagine you're addressing a jury of—girls! Wallow in sentiment—reek of it! (R. C.) Put the boy's love—draw a pathetic picture—tears in your voice, and so on! In a minute she'll cry, and accept him! Oh, I guarantee the complete success of the operation! And see here—Rosy and I are going to Swanage to-morrow—why not join us there, with the young couple?

SIR J. (C.) That's exceedingly good of you—I had meant to trot off to Scotland—

MOLLEN. You can't—at once! Remember—they are engaged! But you can go in a day or two, and leave them with us. The house is large.

SIR J. Really—that is too kind—

MOLLEN. Copy for me, my dear fellow—They'll be under the microscope, but they won't know. (LADY C. *comes down* L. C.) And I'll give the boy some wrinkles. You'll come?

SIR J. (*turn* L.) Does Lady Claude join in the invitation?

LADY C. Most cordially.

MOLLEN. So that's all settled. (*He gets up, goes to the back, and proceeds to wrestle with his overcoat*)

SIR J. (C. *to* LADY CLAUDE) Though I should ask you to explain a few points in your father's work?

(MOLLEN *seized by a sudden inspiration, takes book, sits on settee, and turns down pages* SIR J. *will have to consult.*)

LADY C. (L. C. *merrily*) It contains an index, an appendix, and a glossary.

SIR J. I am very dull. If I needed help—

LADY C. The book will tell you how dangerous it is to invite a woman's assistance.

SIR J. But suppose I seek the danger?

LADY C. There is a chapter on widows.

SIR J. Which I shall not read. There *you* shall be my author.

LADY C. *My* book is to be on man.

SIR J. If you need a collaborator!

LADY C. I shall ask your ward to assist—But, Sir Joseph, I thought you could not talk to women?

SIR J. I cannot—but there is one, all these years, to whom I have said so much, and so often!

LADY C. I am glad you have made an exception. Well, you know where we live, at Swanage?

SIR J. I have not forgotten—I have a memory. . . . There was an elm-tree there—

LADY C. Which still remains, though it has grown older! (MOLLEN *bustles up*) To-morrow then? You will let us know by what train? Good-bye—and you have my best wishes. (B. *goes up to door* L. 3 E.) Papa (*goes up* L. *and Exit* L. 3. E.)

MOLLEN. (*rise, round back* C. *to* L. C.) Yes—send us a wire! Good-bye, my dear fellow. And remember—gallons of sentiment!

(MOLLENTRAVE *turns to the door; as he goes* SIR JOSEPH *clutches him.*)

SIR J. (*away* R. C.) Mollentrave, I can't do it! I can't! At the mere thought of it I feel a chill down my spine. I can't!

MOLLEN. (*coming* C.) Balsted!

SIR J. Look here, why not speak to her yourself?

MOLLEN. I?

SIR J. Why not? It's your business, after

all, this sort of thing. (C.) You're an expert, a professional. I won your case for you yesterday —win mine for me now!

MOLLEN. (L. C.) But it's a delicate subject to bring before a lady one has never met before—

SIR J. I'll introduce you in proper form—tell her you are my mouthpiece—Oh, I'll make *that* all right. And I'll be there, of course, while you —do it—

MOLLEN. Naturally, if you insist—

SIR J. I do—You will?

MOLLEN. Certainly — though — (*getting away* L.)

SIR J. (*following him to* L.) I'm immensely grateful! I'll send for the boy at once and talk to him. I can manage *that* part. You'll see Lady Claude into her carriage, walk to the corner of the street and come back. Then, if you're right about him—

MOLLEN. *If* I'm right!

SIR J. (L. C.) You will put the other little matter before her, in your own inimitable fashion. Eh?

MOLLEN. (L.) I'll be back in ten minutes.

(MOLLENTRAVE *exits* L. 3 E. SIR JOSEPH *has rung* R. PETERS *comes in* L. 3 E.)

SIR J. (R. C.) Tell Mr. Swenboys I want him.

PETERS. Yes, Sir Joseph.

(PETERS *goes* L. 3.E. SIR JOSEPH *hums cheerfully takes up the book, and glances at it.* EVERARD *enters.* SIR J. *frowns, throws down book and waves him to a chair.*)

EVERARD. (L. C.) You want me, uncle?

SIR J. (R. C.) Yes, sit down, sit down. (EVERARD *sits on stool* L. C.) Oh, Everard!

(SIR J. *sits in chair* R. C. *down stage.*)

EVERARD. (*wonderingly*) Why, uncle, what is it? Have I done anything?

SIR J. Done anything, unhappy boy! (*He pauses, perplexedly, then resumes, with melodrama*) I should never have believed it—never!

EVERARD. (*rise and going* C.) But, uncle, tell me—

SIR J. (*waving him back*) If ever a trust was sacred. . . . if ever a man had a right to expect—and you—you!

EVERARD. (C. *in absolute dismay*) Why—what—

SIR J. Isn't the world full of girls whom you could fall in love with? Don't they—pullulate? Aren't there a hundred thousand more women than men in London alone? And must you select, out of them all, the very one whom you—shouldn't?

EVERARD. (*sinking his head*) That wretched Treable woman has told you about the verses!

SIR J. Verses! You stooped to verses!

EVERARD. (*humbly*) I cribbed them.

SIR J. An attempt to obtain credit—under false pretences! Confess it then, degenerate boy! You love my ward!

EVERARD. (*drawing himself up*) Uncle, I do! With every drop of my blood!

SIR J. (*delighted, but simulating great grief*) Ha! It is true then!

EVERARD. I was wrong—there is no doubt I was wrong. But could I help it—put it that way—how could I?

SIR J. I must decline to put it that way.

EVERARD. (*passionately*) Why did you let me come here, and be in her presence, day after day? How live in the same house with her, sit opposite her at meals, and not adore? How look upon

that matchless face, listen to the sound of her voice, its silvery music (*down* L.) and not—fall prostrate?

SIR J. (*making a note on his shirt-cuff*) Matchless face—silvery music—

EVERARD. (*to* R. C.) I worship her, uncle! She is the—very star and loadstone of my existence, the—

SIR J. (*rise*) I see. But, tell me—have you said all this—to her?

EVERARD. (C. *mournfully*) To her not a word! My fingers may have pleaded, as I passed the bread and butter—my eyes may have spoken—but my lips—never! The verses, the fatal verses, merely compared her to the (*away* L. C.) Capitoline Venus—

SIR J. (R. C.) And the Venus, I suppose, wasn't in it?

EVERARD. (*up to him* R. C.) Ah, uncle, don't make fun of me! I confess my fault to you frankly—I know it was wrong—I've always known it. Send me away, sir—I'll do what you bid me. Get me a berth in Africa where the climate's deadliest (*sit* C. *front of table*) I'll go without a word—and you'll soon be rid of me!

SIR J. (*up* R. C.) But, my dear lad, I don't *want* to be rid of you—and I'm not sure that I altogether approve of the deadly climate scheme. All I say is—

EVERARD. You can say say nothing to me that I have not said already to myself—ah, many times! (*rise*) It was a presumption—a mad presumption. Don't be too hard on me!

SIR J. (*gravely*) Everard, I've tried to do my duty by you—

EVERARD. You have been more than a father to me. Be merciful, sir!

SIR J. I will, I will.

EVERARD. All I ask is—

SIR J. All *I* ask is that we now drop heroics and descend to more commonplace ground. Leave Olympus and return to the London pavement——

EVERARD. (L. C. *bewildered*) I don't understand—

SIR J. (R. C.) Why, after all, when one comes to think of it, there is no especial crime in a young man falling in love with a young woman—

EVERARD. (*up* R. C.) A young woman! Margaret!

SIR J. A young goddess, then—but still, it is not unnatural. And, as I say, I don't see—

EVERARD. (*springing wildly to his feet*) You don't mean that there is a hope for me!

SIR J. But I do, I do! I have reason to believe that she is not altogether indifferent.

EVERARD. (*gasping*) Uncle!

SIR J. Has she given you no sign?

EVERARD. (*shyly*) When we played chess last Thursday, she allowed her hand to rest on mine for the appreciable fraction of a second—

SIR J. (*triumphantly*) You see! Mollentrave on Women—the text-book on the subject—would, I am sure, interpret that as encouragement.

EVERARD. Uncle! Don't tell me that you think—(*he rushes wildly about the room*)

SIR J. But I do, I do! What's more, I am convinced! Come, my boy, sit down. (EVERARD *down* R. *back to* C. SIR J. *seizes him and sits him* R. C.) and don't pace the room like an undischarged bankrupt. (*sits* C.) Let us discuss the matter.

EVERARD. Margaret to be mine!

SIR J. Again I say, why not? I shall buy you a practice as a wedding-present, and—as they say in the fairy-stories, you will live happily ever after. Do you authorize me to—sound the lady?

(EVERARD *rises and away* R.)

(MOLLENTRAVE *comes bustling into the room* L. 3 E.)

SIR J. (*rise* C.—*going eagerly to him and whispering into his ear*) Splendid, Mollentrave, splendid! (*aloud*) Let me introduce my nephew, Mr. Everard Swenboys. Everard, this is an old friend of mine—whom we can admit to our fullest confidence. (*down* C.) Mollentrave—my nephew has just confessed to me that he loves my ward!

MOLLEN. (L. C.) You don't say so! Remarkable! Really! (*up* L. C. *puts hat down table* C. *and crosses to down* R.)

SIR J. I have your authority, Everard, to—ask the lady?

EVERARD. (R. C.) Oh, uncle, if you would! One word from you!

SIR J. Very well, then—send her to me! At once!

EVERARD. (*with a look at* MOLLENTRAVE) Now, uncle? Had we not better—

SIR J. Now! The court of Love is sitting! (EVERARD *crosses to* L.) Go, my boy—and tell her to be quick!

EVERARD *shakes his uncle violently by the hand, then rushes out of the room* L. 3 E. SIR JOSEPH *turns to* MOLLENTRAVE *down* R. C. *with enthusiasm,* C.) You're a wizard, you know! It's marvellous! Look here, I made a note or two for you—matchless face, silvery music of her voice—you might bring those in—

MOLLEN. Startingly original, aren't they? You'll find half a dozen really *new* superlatives in my book. So it seems I wasn't wrong, eh? (*goes* R. *by fireplace*)

SIR J. (C.) Extraordinary! If only you're right about her.

MOLLEN. We shall see. My dear friend, I have other cases on hand besides this. (*comes* C.) Have you met Lord Contareen?

SIR J. No—I don't think so.

MOLLEN. I am, shall I say, "steering" *him.* He's in love with my—with a lady, and the lady loves him—without knowing it. (R. C.) I give you my word she has refused him, although she adores him—merely *because* she doesn't know.

SIR J. (C.) Funny! But *you* know, eh?

MOLLEN. *I* know, by what I call consequential induction; and by the same process I'll answer for your ward. By the way what will you do while I—plead?

SIR J. Just go and sit at my desk, eh? (*sit* R. *of desk* C.)

MOLLEN. Yes—that will be best. It won't take long. I hope she'll come soon! (*down* R.) though! Ah—

(MARGARET *has come into the room* L. 3. E.*; she goes to* SIR JOSEPH *and does not at first notice* MOLLEN. *who is at back.*)

MARGARET. (L. *of desk* C.) You wish to speak to me, guardian?

SIR J. (*very embarrassed*) Yes—er—yes.

MARGARET. About Miss Treable? Oh, believe me, she is the o—

SIR J. (*rising down* C. *very fidgetty and awkward*) No, no, it's not about Miss Treable. Let me introduce you to Mr. Mollentrave. Mollentrave, this is my ward, Miss Messilent.

(MARG. *comes down* L. C.)

MOLLEN. (R. C. *bowing*) I am exceedingly happy to make Miss Messilent's acquaintance.

SIR J. (*picking his words with considerable*

effort and difficulty) Margaret, you will possibly —consider it strange—but the fact is—there is something—that I ought to have—said to you—myself—before to-day perhaps (c.)—but it's a—delicate matter—and you know what a rugged old bear I am—and—well, Everard's not much better—and here's Mr. Mollentrave—a very old friend—and he—well, you see, I told him of my —of our—dilemma—and he, in the kindest way in the world—eh, Mollentrave?—well, he'll just tell you, you see, and I'll finish—what I was doing.

(*He beats a hasty retreat to his desk and buries himself in his papers.* MOLLENTRAVE *advances, smiling and mincing.*)

MOLLEN. (R. C. *very volubly*) My dear Miss Messilent, I find myself in a rather embarrassing position. Your guardian, who as you are aware, has, in the most charming manner possible, retained all the shyness of youth in the presence of your adorable sex, has deputed me to speak for him, phrase his sentiments, express his pious desires—in a word, act as his mouthpiece in introducing to your notice a subject that I trust will enlist all your sympathy. Have I your permission?

MARGARET. (L. C. *her eyes roaming from him to* SIR JOSEPH) Certainly.

(MARG. *sits stool* L. C. MOLLEN. *takes chair from* R. C. *and sits* C.)

MOLLEN. (*sitting* C.) My dear young lady, the sixty years that have passed over my head, furrowing my brow and blanching my hair, give me at least the privilege to address you with a certain paternal simplicity, a mild but glowing benevolence. Can you, without too great a stretch of the imagination, look on me, for a very

brief moment, as though I were actually your guardian?

MARGARET. (*more and more puzzled*) If you wish it.

MOLLEN. Ten thousand thanks. You simplify my task. Because the theme on which I have to dwell is not one that can be coldly attacked—scarred veteran as I am, there are still feeble pulsations in my heart when I breathe the magic word—Love! (*He looks searchingly at her*)

MARGARET. (*startled*) Love! (*she throws a quick glance at* SIR JOSEPH, *who dives down deeper behind his desk*)

MOLLEN. (*with much sentiment*) Love! I am fresh from hearing a man tell of his love—oh, the word is too cold!—of his deep, overpowering passion! Miss Messilent, I am still under the spell! I have been the recipient, in my time, of many confidences—but never have I met a creature so absolutely enslaved by the divine emotion, so eager a captive in the chains of beauty—as is this lover—of yours! (*Both rise*)

MARGARET. Of mine! Mine! Me!

MOLLEN. Who but you? Are you not—but forgive me if my advocacy becomes too ardent! (*puts chair back* R. *and goes up to* R. *of* SIR J.) It is your guardian who should be saying these things—but I speak for him, I am the reed into which he has blown! (MARG. *kneels on stool and is facing* SIR J.) It is your guardian who wishes to know whether this man, this lover of yours (*comes* C.) this man who yearns for you, who for the last month has been your satellite, shining with your radiance and dark with your darkness, who has set up a temple in his soul whereof you are the goddess—whether this man shall be flung by you into the shadows of hopeless misery, or be made immortal by the knowledge that you—return—his passion!

MARGARET. (*off stool and sitting* L. C. *looking glowingly at* SIR *J.*) Yes! Yes! Tell him yes!

MOLLEN. (C. *beaming*) Ha! You can accord him, then, a small fragment of—your affection?

MARGARET. Can he doubt it! Oh, he is so much above me! I had never dared to hope!

MOLLEN. (*triumphantly*) Miss Messilent, nor he, I assure you—nor he! (*away* R. C.) Ah, lovers, lovers! Then your guardian may tell Mr. Swenboys—

MARGARET. (*sinking her head*) Ah—poor Everard!

MOLLEN. (C. *smiling*) Poor Everard! I don't think we need pity *him!* (*She rises*) Miss Messilent, I have fulfilled my mission, and now I will leave you. I relinquish my paternal role with regret, with considerable regret—and join the ranks of your other admirers. Miss Messilent, I kiss your hand!

(SIR J. *rises and steps forward: he is beaming with joy.* MOLLENTRAVE *bows to her and crosses her over to his* R. *and goes to the door* L. 3 E. SIR JOSEPH *rises, accompanying him.* MARGARET *remains standing* R. C. *as though entranced.*)

MOLLEN. (*up* L. *at the door, to* SIR J.) Rather good, eh, don't you think, for an impromptu?

SIR J. (*up* L. C.) Good! Magnificent! How can I thank you?

MOLLEN. Tut, tut, I've enjoyed it. Now make her name the day while the ecstatic mood's still on her! Good-bye! Till to-morrow!

(MOLLENTRAVE *goes* L. 3 E.)

(SIR JOSEPH *returns to* MARGARET)

SIR J. (C. *all his awkwardness returning*)

My dear—Margaret, I am really most glad—most glad. And Everard—well, well, I need say nothing about Everard. And now that we—know—will you regard me as—inconsiderate—if I press for an—early—marriage?

MARGARET. (C. *coyly*) Sir Joseph!

SIR J. (*on her* L.) You will have to—er—drop that title soon, my dear and address me—er—less formally.

MARGARET. Not yet, not yet! Give me time.

SIR J. (*a little surprised*) Certainly, certainly—but I trust it will not be too long. And now, one final word. My—er—guardianship will soon be at an end—but I have tried—to—er—fulfil its duties. And I trust that—er—er—you will never regret the—er—step—you are taking today!

(*He goes to her, cordially holding out both his hands.* MARGARET *is about to throw herself into his arms when the door opens and* MRS. MARTELLI *appears* R. 1 E. *She pauses, aghast,* MARGARET *with a smothered cry, rushes out of the room* L. 3. E.)

MRS. M. Sir Joseph! (R.)

SIR J. (C, *gleefully*) Well, Mrs. Martelli?

MRS. M. (R. C. *standing grimly on the threshold*) I hope I do not intrude.

SIR J. (C.) By no means, by no means! We had finished! Ah, Mrs. Martelli, there will soon be an end to Miss Treable!

MRS. MAR. (*open-mouthed*) Sir Joseph! (*with suppressed indignation*) I came to tell you that your clerk is still waiting below.

SIR J. Noyes! Ah, I had forgotten about Noyes! Send him up, (*across to* R.) please. Oh, it's splendid, Mrs. Martelli—splendid!

(MRS. MARTELLI *exits* R. 1 E.)

(*The door at back opens and* EVERARD *appears.*)

EVERARD. Uncle!

SIR J. (C. *rushing to him, and slapping him on the back*) Everard! It's all right! Go to her, my boy!

EVERARD. (L. C. *gasping*) Uncle!

SIR J. Go to her! She adores you! Unworthy, et-cetera—never dared to look so high! Oh, you couple of idiots! Give her the classic kiss, and get her to name the day! She has promised to make it soon. Quick, now—she's waiting!

EVERARD. Uncle!

(*He rushes out wildly back* L. 3 E. SIR JOSEPH *returns to* R. C. NOYES *enters* R. 1 E.)

SIR J. (R. C.) Ah, Noyes, I forgot about you! Here—a present. Take it and read it! (*He hands him the book*)

NOYES. (R. *looking at the cover*) "Mollentrave on Women." (*he stares*)

SIR J. (R. C. *takes book away from* NOYES) Stay though—it's an autograph copy—you must buy one for yourself! Hurrooh! He knows a thing or two, that old man. Well, now what news?

NOYES. (R.) I merely called to see whether you were going to Scotland to-morrow, Sir Joseph.

SIR J. No—not to-morrow—I must alter my plans for a bit. Everard's going to marry my ward, Noyes. A bit of luck, eh? We must see about settlements, and so on. And buy the lad a practice. There are agents for that sort of thing, eh?

NOYES. Certainly, Sir Joseph. And permit me to congratulate you.

SIR J. Thank you, thank you! And enquire about the practice—at once!

NOYES. Have you any preference as regards locality?

SIR J. H'm—a pleasant suburb—not *quite* too near town, eh? Noyes? One doesn't want to be *too* close—to the felicity of the young couple? Turtle-doves demand solitude. Oh, blessings on Mollentrave!

(EVERARD *returns* L. 3 E. *the picture of hopeless despair.*)

SIR J. (C.) Hullo, what's this?

EVERARD. (L. C.) Uncle, she thinks you meant you!

SIR J. (*leaping up*) What!!!

EVERARD. She thinks you meant You!! That you were proposing for yourself! She says she's engaged to—YOU!

SIR J. (*shaking him*) Speak, can't you? What do you mean?

EVERARD (*brokenly*) She does. I didn't undeceive her. How could I? *She's happy—she loves* you—she'll *marry* you! Oh!

SIR J. Oh! Mollentrave!

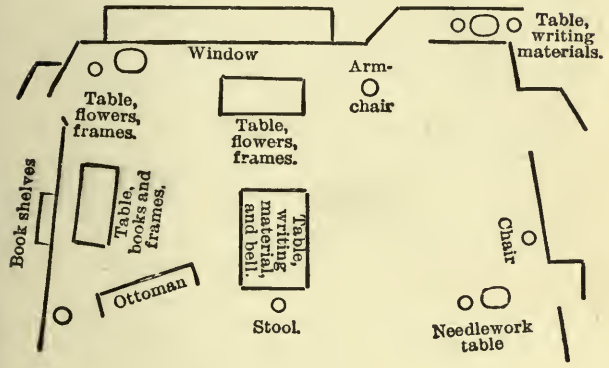
(EVER. *buries his head in his hands and sinks into settee* L. SIR JOSEPH *stands* C. *shouting between his clenched teeth*—"Oh, MOLLENTRAVE!")

CURTAIN.

ACT II.

Time of Representation, twenty-five minutes.

Scene.



ACT II.

(*The drawing-room of* MR. MOLLENTRAVE'S *house in Cadogan Square. At back* L. *door leads to an inner room.* MOLLENTRAVE *is seated glancing over proof-sheets. Suddenly he calls* "MR. DEXTER!" DEXTER *enters from the inner room up* L.)

MOLLEN. (*Is sitting* R. *of* C. *table*) I have a few corrections to make for the new edition. Have you your note-book?

DEXTER (*enters* L. U. E. *producing it*) Yes, sir.

MOLLEN. Sit down, sit down. (DEXTER *sits* L. *of* C. *table*) By the way you've written that letter for me to Lord Contareen?

DEXTER. I have it in there for you to sign, sir, with the others.

MOLLEN. What date did I fix for his—reappearance, Dexter?

DEXTER. (*turning up pages*) I can give you the exact sentence, sir. (*reading*) "You have sown the seed, my dear sir, expect its germination in about six weeks. Then I shall invite you to examine the shoots."

MOLLEN. Yes, that will do! that will do. Couldn't be clearer. Now, Dexter, to return. I don't quite like the sub-title of that new chapter on Marriage, Dexter. Read it.

DEXTER. "The Marriage-Course. The First Lap."

MOLLEN. Exactly. It's too concrete. And suggests other laps to follow.

DEXTER. (*chuckling*) Yes, sir. Lapses.

MOLLEN. (*glancing severely at him over his spectacles*) Dexter, this is not the first time you have offended in this fashion. I beg it may be the last.

DEXTER. (*contritely*) Sir—

MOLLEN. Let me remind you that marriage was not invented merely to give the comic man a chance. Not a word, not a word—we need say no more. (*Rise, crosses to bookshelves* R. *taking out book*) I want a new sub-title—something symbolic, tasteful, and yet adapted to the gravity of the situation.

DEXTER. How would "stage" do, sir?

MOLLEN. It savours of the theatre. My work has a large circulation among Nonconformists.

DEXTER. "Phase," sir?

MOLLEN. (*across to* L. *back of table*) Invariably associated with the moon, or Napoleon. I seek a word that shall happily suggest the first disillusions of the young couple. Stay, I have it! The "Marriage Links" we will call it—there you have the symbol—and for sub-title:—(*down* L.) "The First Bunker." (MOLLENTRAVE *rubs his hands, delighted at his invention*)

(MARTIN *the butler enters with* LORD CONTAREEN, *a well-groomed, vacuous-looking man of forty.*)

MOLLEN. The First Bunk—(*sees* CONTAREEN *reproachfully, crossing to up* R. C. *front of table*) Contareen! You here! That's wrong!

(*They shake hands,* DEXTER *rises.*)

DEXTER. (*rising*) Shall I go now, sir?

MOLLEN. Yes, Dexter. You understand that I take you down with me to Swanage to-morrow?

DEXTER. Yes, sir—certainly, good-day, sir.

MOLLEN. Good-day to you.

(DEXTER *goes up* L. MOLLENTRAVE *turns to* CONTAREEN.)

(*Up* R. C.) It's wrong, my dear fellow—it's wrong! To-day's Friday—she refused you on Wednesday. Too soon!

CONTAREEN. (*eagerly*) Mollentrave — I — (*down* R. C.)

MOLLEN. (*emphatically, down* C.) I have promised that you shall marry my daughter. I have assured you that I have no doubt whatever as to her affection. Then why this—precipitancy?

CONTAREEN. She refused me very decidedly. (*sits on settee* R.)

MOLLEN. My poor Rosamund is a widow. (*up* L. C. *across* C. *and down* R. C.) Also she has had the advantage of correcting my proof-sheets. She has read that passion wins maids, and perseverance widows. She follows the rule. Do the same!

CONTAREEN. I thought—

MOLLEN. Every siege must be conducted on scientific principles. You should now be back in your trenches. Digging, sir—digging!

CONTAREEN. (*eagerly*) Look here, Lady Pentruddock has asked me down to her place in Shropshire.

MOLLEN. Well?

CONTAREEN. Her sister will be there—Muriel, I mean, not Gladys. Muriel has charm.

MOLLEN. Granted. And then?

CONTAREEN. Your daughter knows Lady Muriel. When she learns that I shall be under the same roof with that fascinating person—eh?

MOLLEN. (*to* L. *of table* C.) I see, I see. Well—(*he ponders*)

CONTAREEN. If I tell Lady Claude that I—er—accept her decision cheerfully—eh?—and inform her that I—Lady Muriel—don't you think?

MOLLEN. (*judicially*) The idea has merit.

CONTAREEN. (*humbly*) I got it out of the book.

MOLLEN. Of course. That goes without saying. (*sit* L. *of table* C.) Well, no harm can be done. Though a line to me, from Pentruddock Castle would have been better.

CONTAREEN. Perhaps. But still—I say, you're backing me up?

MOLLEN. I'm supporting you admirably. I have repeatedly expressed my delight at her having refused you.

CONTAREEN. (*staggered*) I say!

MOLLEN. I dwell with satisfaction on the prospect of not seeing you again—

CONTAREEN. Look here!

MOLLEN. And have more than once hinted at a past that is probably strewn with forlorn Nancies and Janes—

CONTAREEN. (*aghast—rise*) By Jove!

MOLLEN. "To kindle the flame of love in the feminine bosom"—I quote from the fifteenth chapter—(*he presses the bell*) "the third party should vehemently, and persistently, denounce the person whom he desires to see enthroned."

CONTAREEN. But still!

MOLLEN. Leave it to me, my dear fellow, leave it to me! I tell you it works like a charm!

(CONT. *re-sits settee* R.)

(MARTIN *comes in* R.)

MOLLEN. Inform Lady Claude that Lord Contareen is here, and ask her to be good enough to descend.

MARTIN. Yes, sir. (*he goes*)

MOLLEN. Now see—when Rosamund comes, I shall retire into the back room there, and write a

letter. I shall give you three minutes. Then you take your leave.

CONTAREEN. Quite so. Three minutes will do!

MOLLEN. And remember—be sprightly! Not a trace of acidity! Persiflage is good—in moderation—*Bring* in Lady Pentruddock's sister—but don't *drag* her in! You understand?

CONTAREEN. Perfectly, perfectly. Oh yes, I see. Gad, Mollentrave, I've always done what you told me. But those Nancies and Janes, you know—

MOLLEN. Tut, tut, women like a dash of colour! Now mind—your visit to-day is merely a p. p. c. card—the whistle that heralds the shunting of the train—

CONTAREEN. Quite so. (*whistle*) I must remember that.

MOLLEN. (*rise, cross to* R. C.) Your line is delicacy. You feel it only due to her, and so forth. Your tone must be soft, mellifluous—a south wind rustling over orange trees. Orange trees, mark you—*not* cypresses!

CONTAREEN. (*rise*) Exactly. Orange trees—*not cypresses.* I see.

MOLLEN. (*takes* CONT. *across* L. C.) Take no notice of her confusion. Be bland, respectful. Retire gracefully. (CONT. *crosses to* L. *front of* MOLLEN.) A gentle pressure of the hand. No more.

CONT. (L.) I'll do it. I'll do it! You're wonderful, Mollentrave, but I say—

MOLLEN. (L. C.) H'sh! (*up* L. C. *to top of table*)

(LADY CLAUDE *enters* R. *with book*)

LADY C. (*down* C.) How are you, Lord Contareen?

CONTAREEN. (*down* C.—*suddenly smitten with*

confusion) I'm very well, thank you, Lady Claude—never was better, never was better!

(*He looks to* MOLLENTRAVE *away* L. *a step*)

MOLLEN. (*up* C. *top of table—to* LADY CLAUDE) My dear, you will excuse me—I have a line to write to—to—oh yes, to Balsted, of course, about the train to-morrow. We take the 11.20—he may as well join us. Your pardon, Contareen—I shall not be a moment.

(LADY C. *puts book away* R.)

(MOLLENTRAVE *goes into the inner room* L. U. E. *rubbing his hands.*)

CONTAREEN. (*disconcerted*) Balsted! the lawyer fellow!

LADY C. (*smiling*) The great barrister—yes. He is coming to Swanage.

CONTAREEN. The deuce he is! Old friend of yours, isn't he?

LADY C. (*sit* R. *of* C. *table, sitting*) I have known him a number of years.

CONTAREEN. Confound it, ain't he a bachelor? (*To* L. *of table* C. *from* L)

LADY C. He was when I last saw him.

CONTAREEN. And how long ago was that?

LADY C. I should think an hour and a half.

CONTAREEN. (*very perturbed*) (*sit* L. *of* C. *table*) Eh? Quite so, quite so. No concern of mine, of course, and all that. Well, what I had to say—the fact is that I—confound Balsted—he's put me off!

LADY C. (*wondering*) Put you off? Off what, Lord Contareen?

CONTAREEN. You see, I didn't know you were going to have visitors at Swanage.

LADY C. (*smiling*) Well, that's not unnatural, is it? We've such a large place there!

CONTAREEN. (*eagerly*) I suppose you wouldn't like me to—

LADY C. After what has occurred, perhaps—

CONTAREEN. (*pleading*) I've only asked you once, you know—

LADY C. (*emphatically*) But I do most earnestly beg you to believe that my decision is final, and irrevocable.

CONTAREEN. (*humbly, rise*) I don't think I made it quite clear to you to what extent I ad—

(MOLLENTRAVE *coughs loudly from the inner room.*)

CONTAREEN. (*quickly*) To what extent I ad—ad—advocate! Funny, isn't it! (*up stage* C. *a step*) Besides, we're too old, and that sort of thing—

LADY C. (*puzzled*) I beg your pardon—

CONTAREEN. (*top of table c.*) Oh, nothing, nothing—a joke that's all—mere persiflage! What I wanted to say was—to break it—h'm delicately—that I was going away too—to Lady Pentruddock's, you know—

LADY C. Indeed? I hope you will have a most pleasant time.

CONTAREEN. Thanks—sure to, sure to! Seems that her sister's there—Muriel, you know, not Gladys. Fine woman, Muriel.

LADY C. (*indifferently*) Very.

CONTAREEN. (*artfully*) Old friend of mine—and I fancy that she—she—you see—well, I—and I rather want to—eh, don't you think?

LADY C. (*clapping her hands*) Admirable! Oh, I'm so glad!

CONTAREEN. (*quickly*) Nothing done yet, of course! There still is time—

LADY C. Time?

CONTAREEN. My visit to-day is merely a kind of—whistle, you know. 'Bout ship, eh? You don't mind?

LADY C. Mind? I! My dear Lord Contareen, I assure you—

CONTAREEN. You've no objection, I mean, to my going down there?

LADY C. Far from it! Indeed, I should most strongly recommend a change of scene. (*rise and away* R)

CONTAREEN. (*cunningly, down* L. *to* C.) And of actors, Lady Claude, eh, of actors? Ha, ha! I'm anxious of course, that you shouldn't think me—(*he pauses*)

LADY C. (*Impatiently, sit on sofa* R) Think you what, Lord Contareen?

CONTAREEN. Not regard it as sudden, eh? Too abrupt and that sort of thing?

LADY C. On the contrary, I shall be delighted!

CONTAREEN. (R. C. *disconcerted*) Oh! delighted!

LADY C. I assure you! I have the greatest respect for Lady Gladys—

CONTAREEN. Muriel, Muriel—not Gladys—

LADY C. Your pardon—I should have said Lady Muriel. Let me declare to you, most earnestly and sincerely, that you have my very best wishes for your success.

CONTAREEN. Of course I've said nothing yet—but once down there—weak man, charming woman—

LADY C. Let us know as soon as it's settled! And I will congratulate you, with my whole heart! Believe it, Lord Contareen!

(MOLLENTRAVE *comes in,* L. U. E. *and goes to top of table* C. *with a discreet preliminary cough.*)

CONTAREEN. (*Looks round to* L.) Just going,

Mollentrave—just going, Lady Claude—au revoir!

LADY C. Good-bye. And my love to Lady Muriel!

CONTAREEN. (*up* R. C.) Quite so, quite so. Good-bye, Mollentrave. I'm afraid I've made an awful hash—

MOLLEN. (*up* R. C. *on his* L.) Good-bye, my dear fellow—good-bye. (*in his ear*) She's piqued—she's piqued! Spade-work—nothing like it! (*aloud*) Good-bye!

(CONTAREEN *goes* R. MOLLENTRAVE *returns to the centre of the room, rubbing his hands.*)

LADY C. (*very earnestly*) Papa, don't practise on me!

MOLLEN. (*blandly*) My child?

LADY C. There are so many specimens for you to play with! Look on me as an exception—a freak, if you like. But *I*, at least, am not a rule of three sum!

MOLLEN. (*sitting on stool* C. *patting her hand*) My dear Rosamund!

LADY C. (*rise*) How *could* you imagine that such an inane, idiotic creature as that—

MOLLEN. It is certainly strange that he should go to Pentruddock. Your resentment is justified.

LADY C. (*up* R. *and across back of table to down* L. C. *scornfully*) Resentment!

MOLLEN. I shouldn't be in the least surprised if Lady Muriel secured him!

LADY C. Oh, she may have him, with all my heart, and all my sympathy too!

MOLLEN. (*slyly*) Of course, my dear, I'm aware that *you* don't care for him. How could you?

LADY C. (*down* L. *smiling in spite of herself*) You refuse to believe me? I cannot convince you?

MOLLEN. (*stroking her condescendingly*) My dear—

LADY C. (L. C.) After all that has happened! After what you have seen of my life! And you really believe that I ever could care for this man! That I, a creature with a heart and soul, am pigeon-holed in your book, and bound to conform to its maxims!

MOLLEN. (*fatuously*) On the contrary—I—

LADY C. (*up and down* L. C.) Is it his title appeals to you—his houses, his money? Years ago, I was obedient—my husband, too, had a title—and you know how dearly I paid for it.... Weave no webs round me! The fly has grown wary—and it has had the advantage, too, of studying the wiles of the spider!

MOLLEN. I quite admit, my dear, that Contareen's change of attitude is reprehensible—very. And I have not the least doubt—

LADY C. (*smiling sorrowfully*) You are incorrigible!

MOLLEN. My dear child! Since I tell you—

LADY C. Ah—I see that I shall have to provide you—with material for a new chapter!

(*She kisses him—he purrs complacently. The door opens and* MARTIN *ushers in* SIR JOSEPH, *who is wildly excited.*)

MARTIN. Sir Joseph Balsted.

MOLLEN. (*eagerly*) Balsted! (*rise and across to* R.)

SIR J. (R. C.) Mollentrave,—awful—the little idiot imagined you were proposing for me!

MOLLEN. (*sitting* R.) No! No!

SIR J. She thought you meant *me*!

MOLLEN. Balsted, how could you! Why, when I left the room she had accepted Everard!

SIR J. And I sent the boy to her—he comes

back, pale as a ghost—and says she's engaged—to ME! (*sit* R. *of* C. *table*)

(LADY CLAUDE *up* L. *and down* L. *convulsed with laughter. Both men turn to her.*)

MOLLEN. (*reproachfully*) My dear Rosamund, your hilarity is misplaced.

LADY C. (*contritely but still choking, sit* L. *by work table*) I'm very sorry—

MOLLEN. Our friend has unfortunately entangled himself in a most serious dilemma—

SIR J. I! That's good! *You* did the proposing!

MOLLEN. You heard me—you even complimented me!

SIR J. (*rise*) It flashed across me at the time—you never mentioned his name!

MOLLEN. (*with an indulgent smile*) Not mention his name! I!

SIR J. If she had accepted Everard, would she, one moment after, have consented to marry me?

MOLLEN. Do not excite yourself, my dear Balsted! What happened, I see it, was this. I dug the hole, and gave you the tree to put in. You popped in the wrong one!

LADY C. What happened, Sir Joseph, after you heard the news?

SIR J. (*to* LADY C.) I rushed on here at once. (*to* MOLLEN.) You've got me into this scrape—get me out!

MOLLEN. My dear friend, my services are of course at your disposal. But, truly, how could you? The affair was so simple!

SIR J. Well, one thing's certain at any rate—she's not in love with Everard—

MOLLEN. (*shaking his head*) That's not certain at all!

SIR J. (*impatiently*) What! When the little fool's in love with me!

MOLLEN. That's not proved.

SIR J. Not proved! When she wants to marry me!

MOLLEN. Didn't I tell you she was an invertebrate sentimentalist? You forgot that. Had you left her undisturbed in the belief that you meant Everard, she'd have gone to the altar with Everard. You persuaded her I had spoken for you—she switched her love on to you. That's the case in a nutshell.

SIR J. Preposterous!

MOLLEN. There you may trust my, let us say, wider experience. But tell me, Everard! He did not undeceive her?

SIR J. No—heroics! She loves you, he says to me—uncle, she loves you! He seemed to take it for granted I *must* love her! And he hoped—we'd be happy! You'll go now—at once?

MOLLEN. I'm willing of course. Only let us first, calmly, review the situation.

(SIR J. *sits* R. *of* C. *table.*)

Assume that I tell your ward bluntly of her mistake—well, what's the result?

SIR J. That I'm free!

MOLLEN. Yes! But at what cost!

SIR J. Cost! What do you mean?

MOLLEN. The situation of which you complained this afternoon will remain, will it not? And intensified—a million times. Nay, it will have become—impossible!

SIR J. All this is beyond me! he turns appealingly to Lady Claude! Lady Claude!

LADY C. It is beyond me too, Sir Joseph—but papa knows—he is infallible!

MOLLEN. The girl has confessed her love for you. A love, mark you, that does not exist, but that *my* explanation will call into being!

SIR J. (*pettishly*) Absurd!

MOLLEN. But it's true! Her feeling for you, at present a mere wayward infatuation, will at once swell into romantic passion. She'll begin to wither—

SIR J. Wither?

MOLLEN. Fade on the stalk! Refuse her food —live on poetry and tea! Be a martyr! Then anæmia acts in. Doctors, nurses, cures—and all the time, mind you, she's hugging an imaginary grief!

SIR J. (*Impatiently*) But, why, in the name of Heaven—

MOLLEN. Heaven only knows. *I* didn't make women—I have merely observed them. If you don't believe me, ask Rosamund.

LADY C. (*demurely*) Sir Joseph knows, I always agree with Papa.

MOLLEN. (*rise and up* R. C.) And, mark you, more, when I tell her you meant the nephew, she at once proceeds to hate the nephew.

SIR J. (*feebly*) Hate him!

MOLLEN. Inevitably.

SIR J. Lady Claude!

LADY C. Papa means that her vanity will be piqued.

SIR J. Vanity!

MOLLEN. Complacently the essential ingredient of a young woman's affections.

LADY C. The book says she will demand an eternity to pass.

MOLLEN. A feminine figure of speech that resolves itself into months! But think of those months with her sighing, dying, crying! (*down* R. C.)

SIR J. (*groaning*) What a catastrophe!

MOLLEN. (*up* R. *of* SIR J.) You're sure—quite sure—you won't marry her?

SIR J. (*angrily*) Mollentrave! (*rising*) If *this* is all the help you can give me—

MOLLEN. (*forcing him back in his chair*) Alternatives! I merely suggest alternatives! You don't marry—that's settled, agreed. But I see no reason why you should not be—engaged!

SIR J. (*rising,* MOLLEN. *sits him again*) Engaged! You're mad!

MOLLEN. (*round back of* C. *table*) Secret engagement! You tell her—paternal again—you give her a month to reflect. Secrecy all round—except us. You bound—she free.

SIR J. How does that help me?

MOLLEN. Follow me closely. (*to* L. *of table* C.) During that month you become—senile.

SIR J. Senile! Why, hang it, I'm only forty-five!

MOLLEN. And she's nineteen! Strip off your limelight—to her you're Methuselah! (*sitting* L. *of* C. *table.*)

SIR J. (*protesting*) I—

MOLLEN. (*breaking in impetuously*) My dear friend, you don't really imagine that she loves *you?* Whatever's real in her loves Everard—or any other good-looking young fellow of his age whom she chances to meet. What she admires in you is your talent, your position, your power. Very well, take them off!

SIR J. (*blankly*) How can I?

MOLLEN. I've told you—be senile. Fidgety, crochety—sensitive to draughts—dyspeptic—adore your food. Flannel nightcap—false teeth—

SIR J. (*indignantly rising*) I haven't!

MOLLEN. *Imagine* you have.

(SIR J. *re-sits.*)

Speak of them often! Boil your milk! Retire at nine, have your paper warmed. Tell her you mean to resign the House, give up the Bar, live in the country, ten miles from a station, and write a book on Constitutional Law!

SIR J. All that, eh?

MOLLEN. And dictate to her five hours a day! Find fault with her spelling—be always finding fault!

SIR J. Lively for both of us! But look here—seeing that she has lived with me for a year, and I *haven't* been senile—

MOLLEN. (*with a petulant gesture*) Tut, tut, tut! Hitherto, you've concealed your—little ailments! But, now that you've won her, are sure of her, you show yourself—as you are! (*rise*) Oh, it's simple enough! And so much for frontal attack. (*a step*) As for skirmishes, we'll ask Rosamund to be good enough to flirt with the nephew—

SIR J. (*turning to her*) To flirt—you?

LADY C. (*merrily*) The poor boy will need consolation. And if I can be of service—

MOLLEN. (*up to* L. *of table* C. *with a flourish*) Within two days she has the boy at her feet! Then your bride becomes jealous. Your tyranny offends her—she begins to see you are old. Romance drops off like paper from a damp wall. Everard's coolness piqued her—she proceeds to discover that she loves Everard. You in dressing gown and slippers—he young Greek god. And, after a month's steady digging—we arrive—at—the real girl!

SIR J. A month.....

MOLLEN. May be less, may be less! Finally, explanation—you discover her in tears—you play the noble Roman, release her unconditionally, Rosamund sends Everard to her—you join their hands. Slow music. Curtain. See?

SIR J. (*rise and down* R.) I don't like the idea of an engagement, even though it be secret. But look here—if I did this—how about Everard? What should I say to him?

MOLLEN. (*to bottom of* C. *table*) Let him be-

lieve—as he already believes—that you admire what's-her-name—but mention the month's probation. Hint darkly at possibility of happy ending. (*to* R. C. L. *of* SIR J.) Bring Everard down to Swanage—I answer for the rest!

SIR J. (*hesitating*) It sounds plausible—though it's a fearful undertaking! But, before deciding, I should like a word with Lady Claude. Will you allow me?

MOLLEN. Certainly, certainly. I'll smoke a cigarette down-stairs—my habit, before dressing. (*cross up* R) You'll find habits useful by the way—I've one or two that I'll tell you. I'll see you before you go!

(*He retires cheerfully humming a tune,* R.)

SIR J. (*to* L. C.) Lady Claude, I've asked for this because—I scarcely know where I am, or what I'm saying! Your father rattles on—he seems convincing—he may be right—but my instinct tells me that, in this fearful muddle, *you* are the surer guide!

LADY C. I?

SIR. J. You! If I spoke rather cynically this afternoon—if I have grown to think rather hardly of women—remember that there was one whom I—loved—and she—wouldn't have me!

(LADY CLAUDE *makes a gesture.*)

Oh, don't be alarmed—I won't drag up the past. No doubt, then, I was merely a wild, impetuous youngster, like my poor Everard to-day. But—I have not forgotten—how deeply I—felt it.... And here I seem, through my carelessness, to have created sorrow for two young lives... I'm a selfish man, of course—I've shown it plainly enough!—but still I've tried—honestly tried—to do my

duty—by both of them....Now I am urged to play an odious comedy—for it *is* odious, is it not?

LADY C. Deception can never be pleasant..... You have all my sympathy.

SIR J. I need it, I need it! Women, after all are an unknown quantity to me. Your father has compiled a series of tables, has dissected and analysed—he may be right, I don't know—but I want *you* to guide me! You, and you only!

LADY C. (*gently*) What can *I* tell you? (*rise and cross* C. *and sitting on stool*)

SIR J. (L. C.) In the first place, this. Is it not rather my duty promptly to undeceive the girl, at any cost? Have I the right to—play with her affections?

LADY C. (*hesitating*) Sir Joseph—

SIR J. Remember, I loved her father. He entrusted his daughter to me, his old friend....Today, when I think of him!

LADY C. You want my honest opinion?

SIR J. I do.

LADY C. Then what I have to say is said in a very few words. One should not trifle with the heart of a girl!

SIR J. What am I to do?

LADY C. It is you, and you only, who can decide.

SIR J. Tell me what you think!

LADY C. The poor child has probably long adored you in secret. She will have read sentiment into your very least words—

SIR J. (*with sudden recollection*) Ha! the flowers on my table, day after day!

LADY C. Laid there by her each morning, fondly, tenderly—

SIR J. Advise me! I will follow you, blindly!

LADY C. Do what is kindest!

SIR J. If I undeceive her—the picture your father has drawn—and your father understands women—

LADY C. What he says may be true of ninety-nine out of a hundred—there is always the hundredth.

SIR J. The hundredth—yes—I don't know—I know her so little! The disillusioning process *might* be effective?

LADY C. It might. One cannot tell.

SIR J. (*eagerly*) Then shall I do it? Shall I?

LADY C. You must know best.

SIR J. (*with deep feeling*) Rosamund, I am appealing to you— for your help!

LADY C. (*very earnestly, rise*) Then, no! I would do the honest, the straightforward thing! ....Go to her yourself, tell her—of the mistake—but oh, so softly, so gently, (c) that her poor little heart shall rest itself upon yours, and not feel—too ashamed! Point out how unwise it would be! Be so full of pity that the wound....shall be scarcely a bruise....Be so tender, so human, that her poor little tears shall freshen her heart, and not scald it....And let there be tears in your heart too—and no trace of—laughter....There! That is my advice. But I may be wrong....

SIR J. No, you are right—I feel it! I go at once. (*round back of table to up* R. C.) You will tell your father. (*coming down* C. *to* R. *of* LADY C.) And, my dear friend, my very dear friend, I —thank you!

(*He takes her hand, which she allows for a moment to rest in his. Suddenly* MOLLENTRAVE'S *voice is heard outside.* SIR JOSEPH *falls back. The door opens and* MOLLENTRAVE ENTERS, *perking and smiling, followed by* MARGARET.)

SIR J. (*away* R. *aghast*) Margaret!

MOLLEN. (*very volubly* R. C.) My dear fellow, Miss Messilent has had the charming idea to come

here and fetch you. Miss Messilent, let me introduce you to my daughter, Lady Claude Derenham. An admirer of your fiancé—like us all!

SIR J. (R. *blankly*) Oh!

MARG. (C. *shyly*) Peters told me where you had gone—I thought—

MOLLEN. (R. C. *beaming*) Sweet of you! Balsted, I've told the young lady how immensely pleased we all are! And how lucky we think you, at your time of life, to have secured so lovely a bride!

SIR J. (*clearing his throat*) I—er—I—

MOLLEN. My dear Balsted, I am sure I am not speaking my opinion alone when I say that never did—November—find so delicious a May! When is the wedding to be?

SIR J. (*away* R. *savagely, beneath his breath*) Wedding, wedding—

MARG. (*sitting on stool* C. LADY C. *sits* L. *of* C. *table—coyly*) He made me promise it would be soon—

MOLLEN. (*chuckling*) Ah, he did, did he? At *our* age, you see, a man's in a hurry—eh, Balsted? Well, you're all coming with us to Swanage to-morrow—

MARG. (*surprised*) Swanage?

MOLLEN. Yes—we've arranged with Sir Joseph. He didn't tell you? Very remiss, of course—very remiss. He's a trifle dictatorial, I'm afraid—but you mustn't mind that—you mustn't mind that!

SIR J. (*trying in vain to get hold of* MOLLENTRAVE) Mollentrave, I want—

(SIR J. *goes up* R. *to* L. *of* LADY C. *who rises*)

MOLLEN. (*to* MARGARET) When you marry a distinguished—and *elderly* man, my dear, you must of course put up with a few little draw-

backs. May must be content with November's —ivy! Eh?

MARG. (*rising and away* R. *to sofa and sitting*) Oh, but he's not so very elderly—

MOLLEN. (*following her to* R.) Oh no, I married a much older last week! I'll show you his photograph. (*shows photograph*)

(*He draws close to* MARGARET *and whispers merrily to her,* SIR JOSEPH *goes to* LADY CLAUDE.)

SIR J. (L.) He has done it! I can't retreat now! It's impossible!

LADY C. (L. C.) No—I'm afraid.

SIR J. (*Both go up* L. C.) (*wildly*) Oh, that father of yours! Well, there it is—we must start —disillusioning! Senile!—ha! and the rest! There's nothing else for it! You'll help me?

LADY C. Of course I'll do what I can!

MARG. (*rising*) Joseph!

(SIR J. *crosses to* R.)

MARG. (*Up* R. C. *holding* SIR J.'s *arm, he is on her* L. *She turns to* LADY CLAUDE) Good-bye, Lady Claude, I need (*up* R. C.) scarcely say my husband's friends will be mine.

(MOLLEN. *goes up* R. *to open double doors.*)

SIR J. (*up* R. C. *groaning*) Husband!

MARG. Good-bye, Mr. Mollentrave—(*sweetly*) Come, Joseph!

SIR J. Oh! ! !

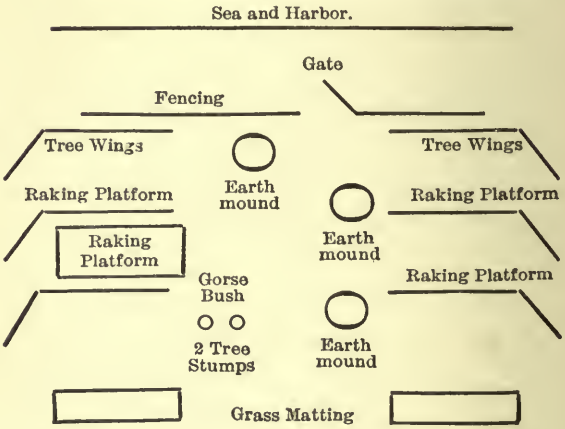
(*They* EXIT R.)

(*She passes her arm beamingly through his and walks him off.* MOLLENTRAVE *turns smiling to* LADY CLAUDE *and rubs his hands.*)

CURTAIN.

ACT III.

Time of Representation, thirty-five minutes.



PROPERTIES USED.

Neck wrap.

Basket (containing) sweets, jelly and scarf.

Times paper.

Telegram and telegram form.

ACT III.

The garden of MR. MOLLENTRAVE'S *house in Swanage. A low fence runs at back, with a thick hedge; behind is the sea, to which a winding path leads, down the rock. There are alleys running to right and left.* MISS TREABLE *is seated on the tree* L. C. *with* DEXTER *standing before her. A week has elapsed since the last Act.*

DEXTER. (C.) Yes, Miss Treable, he is a great man—a very great man! His powers of insight are most extraordinary! I trust you do not resent his—as it were—stripping off the pigment and exposing the unvarnished canvas?

MISS TRE. (*is sitting* R. *tree trunk, haughtily*) I have no doubt that what Mr. Mollentrave says may be true of *some* women—but certainly not of ME!

DEXTER. (*bowing*) You are naturally an exception. His remarks must be taken as applying generally to the sex. (*down* L. C.)

MISS TRE. Regarded from *that* point of view—

DEXTER. (*up* C.) Ah, Miss Treable, in my own humble life I have derived the greatest benefit from Mr. Mollentrave's teaching! And like all geniuses—he is so modest! One of his most brilliant aphorisms was—I say it with pride—inspired by me.

MISS TRE. (*indifferent*) Indeed?

DEXTER. (R. C. *resting on* L *tree trunk*) I assure you. You must know that my wife has a large circle of relations. I will confess to you

that I somewhat resented their constant interference in our affairs. I mentioned the matter to Mr. Mollentrave. Without a moment's hesitation that remarkable man dictated the line: "Marital happiness begins when the wife's relations—leave off!"

MISS TRE. (*sarcastic*) Profound. Very.

DEXTER. (*sit on* L. *trunk*) He has permitted me to compile a little volume of extracts, "The Mollentrave Birthday Book"—one coruscation for every day of the year. A good idea, is it not? (*rising*)

MISS TRE. (*rising*) Admirable! But I doubt whether many women will buy the book. (*down* R.)

DEXTER. (*moving off*) If all those who consider themselves exceptions purchase it, Miss Treable, I shall be perfectly satisfied. (*goes up* C.)

(*He goes through the gate.* SIR JOSEPH *comes stealthily along looking worried and haggard* R. 3 E.)

MISS TRE. (R. C. *brightly*) Good morning, Sir Joseph.

SIR J. (C.) Good morning. I had hoped to find Mr. Mollentrave here. Do you happen to know—

MISS TRE. Would you wish me to tell him?

SIR J. I should be much obliged.

(MISS TREABLE EXITS R. 3 E.)

(SIR JOSEPH *throws himself on the grass* L. *and plucks savagely at it, muttering to himself. After a moment* MARGARET *comes running from the house* R. 3. E., *looks round, and gives a glad cry as she sees* SIR J. *The cry becomes re-*

proachful when she finds he is lying on the grass. She carries a small basket in her hand.)

MARG. Oh, Joseph, dear Joseph, how could you! Lying on the grass! (*puts basket down* R. C. *and helps* SIR J. *to rise.*)

SIR J. (L.) (*getting up. Miserably*) H'm I—

MARG. (L. C.) Wicked man! With your rheumatism! And no muffler! I found it in the hall! Oh, naughty, naughty! (*she produces it from the basket*) Here it is, sir! Put it on at once! (*puts muffler round him*) (*taking him to* R. C.) (*he sits* R. *trunk of tree*) And it's twelve o'clock! I've brought your essence—here—and a spoon. (*she produces them from the basket and feeds him*) What would you do without me?

SIR J. Impossible to conceive!

MARG. (*she sits on his L.*) Take it, sir! (*he laps it up piteously*) To think of you all these years, having to look after yourself, and hide, because he wouldn't let his little girl see how ill he was! Oh, poor, poor! (*she feeds him a second time and wipes his mouth with the muffler*) But she'll take care of him now! Only wasn't it wicked of you to slip off like that? You had only dictated for an hour and a half!

SIR J. I thought you were tired!

MARG. (*with enthusiasm*) Tired! I could go on forever! It's immensely interesting—fascinating. Oh, how wonderful you are!

SIR J. (*clearing his throat*) H'm—I—

MARG. Constitutional Law, one would think would be a dry subject. To me it's a fairy tale.

SIR J. Er—

MARG. Perhaps because *you* are speaking! You! Nouns and adjectives cease to be parts of speech—they become parts of—you!

SIR J. (*with a great effort*) I have frequently

had occasion to remark to you, Margaret, that I have a great distaste for sentimentality. I have explained to you—the month of probation—

MARG. One week has expired. Has it been a week? Can the days have flown so quickly?

SIR J. They have evidently contrived to. Although—

MARG. (*rise, up* C.) See how the sun is shining—how radiant the water is—and the sky! The dancing sunlight! Oh, what does it say to you, the sunlight! (*down* R. C. *to* SIR J.)

SIR J. (*impatiently*) It says to me that it's very hot—and that we're talking nonsense.

MARG. Oh, let us, for once! I've been so good! —Joseph, you coughed! You must take a lozenge. (*she produces a box from the basket*) You must! Mr. Mollentrave says that you have the beginnings of asthma.

(*She opens the box, takes out a lozenge, and forces it between his lips. He swallows it, pathetically.*)

Miss Treable and I are practising first aid, in case you should fall down—

SIR J. (*savagely*) And why in the name of goodness should I fall down?

MARG. Mr. Mollentrave told me that your limbs are rather unsteady—

SIR J. (*clenching his fists*) Ah, Mollentrave, Mollentrave!!

MARG. (*kneeling on his* L. *She puts his arm on her shoulders, fondly*) But have no fear, dear one! You shall lean on me—I shall be your crutch, your support! Oh, the thought of us two in our cottage—just you and I! I dream of it!

SIR J. (*growling, taking arm away*) No dances—no theatres—not even a visitor—

MARG. Shall I want any of these—when I have

—you! You, who have given up all—for my sake —for me!

SIR J. (*fidgeting*) H'm—but still—I fancy you'll find it dull—

MARGARET. I? Never! You don't know me yet—not altogether, I mean. Oh, if you would let me speak to you—about myself—

SIR J. (*rise and cross* C., *throwing lozenge away—fretfully*) That theme is barred—by consent. Don't you think you had better go back to the house? Unless you would like to bathe?

MARGARET. (*rise, firmly*) No—you do not bathe—I shall not either. No pleasure in which *you* cannot join, can henceforth be a pleasure to me!

SIR J. (*turning up stage—groaning*) Come —we'll go back to Law! (*he rises*)

MARGARET. Yes, yes—let us! But stay—I have a word to say to you—

SIR J. More words?

MARGARET. Not of myself this time—nor of you —but of—Everard!

SIR J. (*with a gleam of hope*) Everard!

MARGARET. (*reproachfully*) Oh, Joseph, my own Joseph, what a suspicion! Could you imagine! Oh!

SIR J. (*groaning again*) He is more of your age—I thought—I told you I should not blame you—

MARGARET. Never dare to hint at such a thing again! I regard him—it is my duty to regard him—with the serene, but affectionate eyes, of an —aunt. (*sit* R. C.)

SIR J. (C.) Aunt!

MARGARET. And—I confess—it grieves me—to see him—so much taken up with—Lady Claude.

SIR J. (*eagerly*) Ah, you have noticed—

MARGARET. Day after day he is with her—with her all the time. She—ah, Joseph, you may

not have observed it—but women have quick eyes! Lady Claude was a friend of yours once, I know—but she is a designing woman!

SIR J. (*angrily*) I say! Look here!

MARGARET. Oh, I mean nothing unkind. Women of that age—she is *at least* thirty-five—naturally crave to be—admired. And it is perfectly plain to me that she—is drawing Everard on.

SIR J. (*grimly*) Really!

MARGARET. She flirts with him outrageously! She won't let him out of her sight! I've been looking forward to finding him a wife—you and I together—some girl who would make him happy. . . . But Lady Claude!

SIR J. (*cunningly*) Everard certainly seems to admire her—

MARGARET. Is it not incomprehensible! She's so old.

SIR J. H'm, if it's the disproportion of age that shocks you, think of us! I—fifty—and you nineteen!

MARGARET. (*rise, and up to him*) My love shall twine round you so softly that we shall divide my youth—shall share it. And, in the days to come, we shall ask—which one is old—Joseph—or Margaret?

SIR J. (*sulkily*) Conundrums of that kind will be useful, on winter evenings, with the wind howling down the chimney, and the rain coming through the roof—(*turn away* L.)

MARGARET. (*getting on* SIR J.'S L.) There can be no wind when you are near me, and no rain can come through the roof of our love!

SIR J. (*throwing up his hands in despair*) Oh, no more at present, please!

MARGARET. (*laying a hand on his arm*) You'll speak to Everard?

SIR J. Why on earth should I?

MARGARET. Joseph! Shall we let the poor boy throw himself away on—

SIR J. (R. C. *laughing hysterically*) Ha, ha! Oh, that's very good! Throw himself away on—Lady Claude!

MARGARET. (C.) (*offended*) You think it's impossible? But I tell you I've seen—

SIR J. My child, we've talked nonsense enough for one morning. Let's go. (*takes her hand and is about to lead her away* R. MOLLENTRAVE *comes in breezily up* L. C.) Ah, there's Mollentrave. I must have a word with him. Run on to the house—I'll follow. (*giving her the basket*)

MARGARET. (*fondly* R.) Come soon, dear one—come soon. When my eyes do not rest on you they grow tired with waiting!

SIR J. (R. C.) Please go, there's a good girl!

(MARGARET *departs regretfully* R. 3 E. MOLLENTRAVE *has been coming from the other side. He wears his usual air of supreme satisfaction*)

MOLLEN. (*up* L. C.) You want me, Balsted? All going well?

SIR J. (*savagely* R. C. *takes muffler off*) Oh, wonderfully well. The way we're progressing is extraordinary—very!

MOLLEN. (*his head on one side*) The trained observer would almost detect a suspicion of—satire.

SIR J. Satire! Heaven forbid! It's true that the girl grows fonder and fonder—

MOLLEN. She has only tasted the jam so far—but the powder's working!

SIR J. She Josephs me from morning till night! She'll be calling me Joey soon. (*down* R. C.)

MOLLEN. (C.) No, no, Balsted! I should *not* encourage her in the use of the diminutive!

SIR J. (*savagely*) Gurrh! Look here, Mollentrave—

MOLLEN. Impatient person! I said a month, did I not? So far but a week has passed—(MOLLENTRAVE *sits* L. C.)

SIR J. (*sit* R. C.) Another week will drive me crazy. I dictate law to her—the dullest stuff I can find—I tell you she likes it, she never wants me to stop!

MOLLEN. You will forgive me, my dear Balsted—but have we been quite—senile—enough?

SIR J. Senile! Have I been senile? Haven't I simulated aches and pains, and congenital insanity, till I simply detest myself? Man, she loves me the more for it!

MOLLEN. (*airily*) Merely the first stage, Balsted! Peeling!

SIR J. I can't go on—I tell you I can't! The fact is, Mollentrave, that you've been hopelessly wrong.

MOLLEN. (*emphatically*) Events are following exactly the path that I had marked out; they are, with unerring precision, pursuing to a hairsbreadth the line I had indicated in my mind.

SIR J. (*sarcastic*) Indeed! Then perhaps you'll explain—

MOLLEN. My dear Balsted, believe that I make not the slightest reflection upon your intelligence when I remark that a general's plans are rarely comprehensible to his subalterns.

SIR J. (*pettishly*) This is not a case—

MOLLEN. (*rise and go* C.) Pardon me, but it is. If I may borrow an analogy from your legal jargon, I am the leader here, and you the junior. Is that not so?

SIR J. I have made up my mind. I shall tell her the truth.

MOLLEN. Do—and they'll drag up her body on Swanage beach to-morrow.

SIR J. Absurd!

MOLLEN. Let that sentimental girl realize that she has been fooled—she'll take her life. That's certain. And as her hair's long she'll choose the sea. (*away* L. *and up* L. C.)

SIR J. Unfortunately I've lost my faith in you, Mollentrave.

MOLLEN. (*shrugging his shoulders*) That, of course, is a pity.

SIR J. Am I not justified? See your great scheme about Everard! She isn't jealous at all.

MOLLEN. Has she spoken about him?

SIR J. Yes—she wants to find him a wife.

MOLLEN. And not a word about Rosamund?

SIR J. She thinks Lady Claude flirts with him, and doesn't seem to like it. But, beyond that—

MOLLEN. (*triumphantly*) Beyond that! And you complain! Balsted, that's love! The real girl creeping up, through the cotton wool! My dear fellow! Couldn't be better! It couldn't indeed!

SIR J. I don't know—she didn't speak like that at all. And the boy has been odd—he avoids me—he doesn't address one word to Margaret—

MOLLEN. (*with emphasis*) The boy follows the rule! He nurses his passion. Rosamund consoles him—she always talks about Margaret! What more do you want? And the girl thinks they flirt! He watches her hungrily—oh, I've observed it!—he waits for his hour. You'll see.

SIR J. (*with a gleam of hope*) You really think that? You really think that?

MOLLEN. (*sits on* JOSEPH'S L.) I give you my word I never believed matters *could* be so far advanced.

SIR J. Then perhaps I had better go on?

MOLLEN. (*rise.* SIR J. *rises*) Would you turn back, with the harbour lights in sight? Look here, I'll knock off a fortnight! I ask for

one week more—just one week! And before that's out you'll have them both on their knees to you.

(LADY CLAUDE *comes in* R. 3 E. *and crosses* L. C.)

Rosamund, Rosamund! Balsted has been complaining—losing heart! Tell us about Everard! He's always talking of Margaret?

LADY C. (*up* C., *sadly*) Always, always! For hours at a time.

MOLLEN. (*up* R. C. *turning triumphantly to* SIR J.) Balsted!

LADY C. (*plaintively*) She's a very sweet girl, and I'm fond of her—but—the subject's beginning to pall!

(MARGARET *off cries "Joseph"*)

MOLLEN. She's calling you, Balsted.

SIR J. (*down* R. *sulkily*) Let her call.

(MARGARET *off louder "Joseph! Joseph!"*)

MOLLEN. You must go to her, Balsted! Play the game. One week more—

SIR J. I'd rather spend it in gaol, picking oakum. (MARGARET *off, "Joseph!* JOSEPH!!") Oh, Mollentrave, if it were not for your daughter, how I'd wish that I never had met you!

(*He goes—miserably*—R. 3 E.)

MOLLEN. (*coming down* R. *shaking his head*) And that man, Rosamund, is one of our most eminent lawyers!

LADY C. (*down* R. C.) Papa, I must tell you —it's strange—though Everard and I talk of nothing but Margaret every day, from two till seven—

MOLLEN. Well?

LADY C. (*pathetically*) Think of it! From two till seven—every day!

MOLLEN. Science must have its martyrs! Tell yourself that you're watching human love wriggle —under the microscope!

LADY C. Though he recounts, with minutest detail, every word she has spoken to him since they first met—what she said, what he said, how she looked, what she wore, the gestures she made —still, and for all that, I have a feeling at times, a kind of idea—

MOLLEN. (*waving his arm*) My child, you know my opinion of feminine intuition! In my book I class it under the head of popular fallacies. (*with a change of voice, and sudden energy*) Rosamund, I imagine the moment to be almost ripe for my grand coup! (*takes* LADY CLAUDE'S *hands and sits her* R. C. *on his* L.)

LADY C. What will you do?

MOLLEN. (*sitting* R.) I shall now proceed to work on the clay. I will provoke Everard to frenzy.

LADY C. How?

MOLLEN. He knows of course of the month of probation—he builds on that. To-day he shall learn that Balsted proposes, at the earliest possible moment, to lead Margaret to the altar!

LADY C. (*doubtfully*) You will tell him that?

MOLLEN. I will. And the result? A scene between the two young people before which the most passionate episodes of Romeo and Juliet pale into insignificance! For I shall also tell Margaret that *you* have fallen desperately in love with Everard!

LADY C. (*protesting*) Papa! You will never say that!

MOLLEN. Discreetly—by nods and jerks—oh, you may trust me! And there ensues—in chemical parlance—a liberation of two gases—that meet—and explode!

LADY C. (*rise, up* C.) Oh, I hope that they'll

explode soon! See, there he is—under the trees! He is waiting.

MOLLEN. (*rise and up* R.) Let him come—I will leave you. Prepare him, Rosamund—pave the way—lay down the stones—then *I* shall come—the steam roller! I have every confidence in you, my child.

(*He skips off nimbly* R. 3 E.—*after an instant* EVERARD *comes in* L. 3 E.)

LADY C. (C.) Ah, Everard—my father has just left me—we were talking of Margaret.

EVERARD. (C. *on her* L.) (*indifferently*) Ah?

LADY C. The sweet girl! How beautiful she looks to-day!

EVERARD. She has a certain prettiness—

LADY C. Oh, Everard, her eyes! I don't think I ever have seen such eyes! One moment so tender—another so deep and glowing—

EVERARD. As your father says, Lady Claude, those qualities are common to the optic organs of all mammals. And—let me ask you—*why* will you always speak about Margaret?

LADY C. Because I admire her so much! She has youth—ah, youth! (*sit* R. C.) And besides, dear Everard, it seems to me that Margaret has been a favourite topic—with us both!

EVERARD. (*sit* R. C. *on her* L.) To-day at least I decline to talk of her—but of you—only of you.

LADY C. There is nothing to say of me, dear Everard. I—was. Among you young people I seem to move like a—tradition. Margaret says the things I used to say—she dreams my dead dreams. And I am fond of her—because I see in her—my old self.

EVERARD. (*eagerly*) That self has not suffered—time only has mellowed it—wisdom has crowned it—

LADY C. (*cheerfully*) You must not waste those pretty speeches on me! And tell me, why this affected indifference? Do I not know how passionately you adore her?

EVERARD. (*rising*) Lady Claude, I will confess to you, frankly and honestly, there *was* a time when I believed I loved Margaret—

LADY C. (*staring*) When you believed—!

EVERARD. As your father observes—quoting Tolstoy, I think—I was attracted by a well-fitting jersey and a pair of Paris shoes.

LADY C. Everard!

EVERARD. But it was, I need scarcely say, the merest infatuation—

LADY C. What!!!

EVERARD. Could it have been other—since now I am conscious—how wholeheartedly I love—you!

LADY C. (*wildly*) Me! You love me!

EVERARD. You. My feeling for Margaret was immature sex-attraction. At your feet (*kneeling on her* L.) I lay the profound and reasoned devotion—of a man. Rosamund, I love you. I ask you to marry me. Be my wife!

LADY C. (*aghast and helpless, rise and cross* L.) You can't mean this? (*He tries to take her hand, she rises hurriedly and eludes him.* SIR J. *comes from* R. 3. E.) (L. C.) There is your uncle. Leave us, leave us!

EVERARD. (C.) Why? I will tell him—

LADY C. No, no! Go to my father! Let him know! Please!

EVERARD. Since you wish it. (*He goes up* R., *passing* SIR J. *haughtily*) I shall return for my answer. (*he goes*)

LADY C. (L. C.) He has proposed!

SIR J. (R. C.) What!!!

LADY C. Imagine it! He has fallen in love—with me!

SIR J. (*slowly*) Everard has fallen—in love —with you?

LADY C. Yes! Imagine it! A catastrophe!

SIR J. (*dully, down* R. C. *and sitting*) Very awkward. Very.

LADY C. (C.) How could one conceive it! I've been sympathetic—that's all! Talked about Margaret! Oh, I assure you, I've done nothing but talk about Margaret!

SIR J. There's something odd about boys and girls nowadays. But, of course, it's all Mollentrave—(*he clenches his fist*)

LADY C. What must I do? Tell me—advise me!

SIR J. You haven't accepted him?

LADY C. (*indignantly*) Sir Joseph!

SIR J. You see, things are just a trifle topsy-turvy. My—bride—grows more and more devoted.

LADY C. I'm completely bewildered! The poor boy seemed terribly in earnest—

SIR J. So does the poor girl! I'd like to shake them both in a bag! Well, *you'll* have a week of it now.

LADY C. How to refuse him without—

SIR J. You'd better accept him—why not? You'll find, we'll both have to marry them. Then, some day perhaps, they'll elope together—and Mollentrave on Women will rub his hands and cry "There!"

LADY C. (*very distressed*) What am I to say to Everard? Oh, what?

SIR J. Be senile! Boil your milk!

LADY C. (*indignantly*) Sir Joseph! Is this your sympathy? (*sit* L.)

SIR J. (*meekly and deprecatingly, rise and to* L. C.) My dear friend, I've had seven days of Margaret. I thought my brain was fairly strong

—but it's giving. I tell you I'm growing helpless —turning to pulp—

LADY C. But advise me—advise me!

SIR J. I can't. You know—it sounds absurd —I did have some hopes of marrying you myself —I did indeed. (*away* R.) Well, now Everard claims you—and I shall soon be led by Margaret to the altar, with Miss Treable propping me up on the other side. We can't do anything—that's how matters are!

LADY C. Do you think *I* will marry Everard?

SIR J. (*helplessly sit* R. C.) I don't know—I don't think at all. Mollentrave does the thinking —Mollentrave!

(MOLLENTRAVE *bustles in, beaming,* R. 3 E.)

MOLLEN. (C.) (*looking wonderingly from one to the other*) Dear me, why this air of depression?

LADY C. (*both rise and up to knoll*) Depression! Papa! Have you seen Everard?

MOLLEN. (C.) I have, this very moment.

SIR J. } (*excitedly*) Well? Well?
LADY C. }

MOLLEN. (*looking from one to the other*) Rosamund! Balsted! You surely wouldn't have me believe that you are not pleased?

SIR J. (*amazed*) Pleased!

MOLLEN. (*emphatically*) Yes, sir, I say pleased—at this magnificent development of my scheme!

LADY C. When Everard wants to marry me!

SIR J. And has ceased to love Margaret!

MOLLEN. (*more in sorrow than in anger*) Amazing! *You,* Balsted, you—well—you don't surprise me. But Rosamund—my own child—no, I should not have believed it!

SIR J. Did he, or did he not, inform you that he had proposed to your daughter?

MOLLEN. He most undoubtedly did.

SIR J. And was *that* what you wanted?

MOLLEN. Can you ask? What else?

LADY C. (*reproachfully*) Papa! When you said—

MOLLEN. My dear child, I do not admit even you into my closest confidence. You have done your share, both of you—now leave me to do mine.

SIR J. Will you condescend to inform us—

MOLLEN. You will continue the treatment as before.

SIR J. (*madly*) I am to go on with Margaret—

MOLLEN. (*calmly*) You are.

LADY C. (*helplessly*) And—I?—

MOLLEN. Will persistently—sympathise—with Everard.

LADY C. But he has proposed! What am I to do?

MOLLEN. Be flattered—in case of need even affectionate.

LADY C. (*horror stricken*) Affectionate! (*away* L., *and sitting.*)

MOLLEN. Discreetly—remotely—let us say, in a spiritual and disembodied fashion. You may, if you wish it, hint at Lord Contareen—

SIR J. (*looking up eagerly*) Lord Contareen?

MOLLEN. Ah, didn't you know? He and my daughter—(MARGARET *calls "Joseph" and comes in with the "Times" in her hand.*) Pardon me —there's the girl. I'll send her away—I have to give you further instructions. Wait here—I shan't be a moment.

(*He goes quickly to* MARGARET *off* R. 3 E., *and walks her off, talking eagerly to her.*)

SIR J. (*across to* L. C., *sitting*) (*excitedly.*) What is this about Lord Contareen?

LADY C. A foolish creature, whom Papa wishes me to marry.

SIR J. (*aghast*) Marry! What, what! Marry —you!

LADY C. Yes. And he thinks—

SIR J. Rosamund! Is there a man in the world whom you can marry—but me!

LADY C. Sir Joseph! You said just now—

SIR J. (*kneeling on her* R.) Rosamund, I love you! I always have loved you! You know it!

LADY C. (*embarrassed*) I—I—

SIR J. During this diabolic week there has at least been *you!* You'll marry me, won't you?

LADY C. Oh, Sir Joseph, is this the time—

SIR J. It is, it is! To the devil with all the rest! We'll elope!

LADY C. Elope?

SIR J. Yes—and leave Mollentrave to settle matters! Rosamund, tell me!

LADY C. What can I tell you? What?

SIR J. That you care for me! Will you?

LADY C. But you are not free!

SIR J. (*wildly*) Not free, not free! But when I am—as I shall be, I swear it! then—?

LADY C. Then—oh, then I shall say "yes" many times!

SIR J. (*rise and raising her*) Rosamund—dearest!

(*He rushes towards her—she stays him with a gesture.*)

LADY C. Hush! He's coming back!

(SIR JOSEPH *gets back* R.)

(MOLLENTRAVE *bustles in* R. 3 E., *holding the "Times" in his hand.*)

MOLLEN. (C.) She was bringing you the

"Times"—here it is—she assures me it has been warmed and all the microbes boiled out of it! You *are* so fussy, Balsted! Here! (*He hands him the paper.*)

(SIR JOSEPH *takes paper, goes up* R. C.)

LADY C. (L. C.) Papa! Does Margaret know?

MOLLEN. About Everard? Oh yes. And of course she's indignant. Although she adores our friend Balsted, she resents the desertion of an ancient admirer.

SIR J. (*coming down* C.) I fail to see how this helps us.

MOLLEN. (R. C.) Balsted, Balsted, you surely affect this denseness! I've told Everard, by the way, that he has my full consent and approval.

LADY C. (L. C.) Papa!

MOLLEN. That the decision rests with my daughter—

LADY C. (*cross to* C.) With *me!* What am I to say to him?

SIR J. (L. C.) (*whispering to her*) We'll elope!

MOLLEN. In the meantime Balsted will be good enough to overwhelm Margaret with his elderly devotion—

SIR J. I won't!

MOLLEN. You will! Where you were doddery before, you will now be paralytic! You will, for the next week, refuse to stir from the house, or let Margaret do as much as budge from your side!

SIR J. (*ironic*) Really?

MOLLEN. Yes. And Rosamund does more or less the same with Everard.

LADY C. Papa, I can't! I tell you I can't!

MOLLEN. You must! *I* tell you, you must! (LADY C. *goes up* C.)

(MARGARET *calls "Joseph" and appears at the same place as before.* BALSTED *is* L.)

(*Down* L. C.) The girl again! Balsted, we will leave you with her. Read your paper—she mustn't think we've been plotting. Read it, I say—at present you're simply glaring!

LADY C. (*up* R. C. *intercepting* MARGARET *—speaking very gently*) Margaret—my dear Margaret!

MARGARET. (*up* R. *coldly*) I congratulate you, Lady Claude.

LADY C. You congratulate me! You believe—

MOLLEN. (*up* C.) (*sternly*) Rosamund, I want you! Come!

(*He marches her off* L. U. E., MARGARET *looks scornfully after her, then sits on the grass, close to* SIR J. *who holds the paper as a shield.*)

(SIR JOSEPH *crosses* R. *and sits.*)

MARGARET. (C., *reproachfully*) Joseph, I warned you! You refused to take any steps! Now you see!

(SIR JOSEPH *turns over the paper wildly.*)

MARGARET. It is unpardonable of them both, but he, the poor boy, is at least to be pitied. There really should be a law against elderly women marrying mere boys! But it's our duty to do something, isn't it, Joseph? We really can't stand by and allow him to be so foolish—can we?

(EVERARD *comes in,* R. 3. E.)

Ah, Everard, Everard! We have heard the—news. Your uncle has something to say to you—haven't you, Joseph?

(*Comes down* R. C. *taps him on the arm,* SIR JOSEPH *suddenly leaps up* R. C. *with a wild yell*)

(EVERARD *comes down* L. C.)

MARGARET. Oh, what is it? Another attack, Joseph?

SIR J. (*flourishing the paper and pointing to a paragraph*) Here, here, who has done this? I say, who has done this?

EVERARD. (*amazed at his vehemence*) Why, uncle—

MARGARET. (*rushing up with smelling salts*) Joseph, you know you should not get excited!

SIR J. (*shaking her off*) Leave me alone! Go away! I want to know how it got into the papers! (*cross to* C.) Who said it? Who?

MARGARET. (R. C.) Said what, Joseph dear? What has happened?

SIR J. (C. *fiercely*) There's an announcement here that I mean to resign the House, and give up the Bar!

MARGARET. Oh! That wretched man must have put it in!

SIR J. (*glaring at her*) Man! What man?

MARGARET. He called to see you yesterday, while you were resting. I couldn't disturb you, of course—so I—

SIR J. (*choking with rage*) *You* saw him? You?

MARGARET. And I told him—I was so proud!

SIR J. You told him! But it's not true!

MARGARET. (*staggering*) What!!!

SIR J. (*wild with excitement and fury*) No —it's not true—it's none of it true! Oh, you—idiot!

EVERARD. (L. C. *advancing, horror-stricken*) Uncle! How dare you!

SIR J. (*ignoring* EVERARD *and still glaring at*

MARGARET) None of it true! All sham and humbug, you—wretched little idiot!

(*He rushes off wildly* R. *3* E., MARGARET *bursts into a torrent of hysterical sobs, and sinks on to the seat* R. EVERARD *is deeply moved—following* SIR JOSEPH *to* R. *and then impetuously to her.*)

EVERARD. (R. C. *deeply pained*) Margaret! Don't cry! Don't!

MARGARET. (*between her sobs*) Go—go—leave me! Go to your Lady Claude! Who cares about me!

EVERARD. (*humbly*) Margaret!!!

MARGARET. He has deceived me—I see it all now! The cottage in the country—the beautiful book— (*wringing her hands*) (*rise and cross* L.) Oh, *can* men be so wicked!

(EVERARD *follows her* L. C.)

(*Feebly*) It was so sweet—his giving up all—for me! His being so helpless, and wanting me, so much! And now—oh, wretched girl that I am! (*her sobs burst forth afresh, go up* C. *and sit, pushing* EVERARD *away*)

EVERARD. (*up* R. C.) Margaret! Don't! I can't stand it!

MARGARET. The wickedness of it! Oh, the wickedness!

EVERARD. But you loved him! You told me you loved him! When he proposed—

MARGARET. It was such a surprise—and I was so flattered! But love! How could I love—an old man!

EVERARD. (*more and more bewildered, sits up* C. *on her* R.) Margaret!

MARGARET. An—ugly—old man!

EVERARD. What—what!

MARGARET. And I—I admired him, of course. But I confess that at first—only then, when Mr. Mollentrave told me of all his diseases—Everard! His heart isn't weak?

EVERARD. (*rise*) No!

MARGARET. His limbs aren't feeble?

EVERARD. Not in the least!

MARGARET. He's not even asthmatic?

EVERARD. No more than I am!

MARGARET. (*raising her hands pathetically to Heaven*) Oh! ! ! And yet how great his love must be, for him to have stooped to this!

EVERARD. (*scornfully*) His love! He has called you an idiot! You!

MARGARET. (*sobbing again*) Yes—a wretched —little—idiot! And what had I done to deserve it! (EVERARD *sits* C.) Oh, leave me, leave me! Go to your Lady Claude!

EVERARD. (*trembling with excitement*) You can't marry him now!

MARGARET. Will he let me escape, do you think? All this week, the hungry love in his eyes!

EVERARD. But you—if you don't love him?

MARGARET. I loved what I *thought* was him. And I—I am faithful—*I* do not change—*I* don't says things to one woman one week and then make love to another! Why do you stay here, Everard? Your bride is waiting!

EVERARD. (*desperately*) Do you think *I* want to marry Lady Claude?

MARGARET. (*scornfully*) Would you have proposed to her, if you didn't?

EVERARD. I proposed out of pique, because you—

MARGARET. (*excitedly*) What, what!

EVERARD. I read Mr. Mollentrave's wicked book, and believed it! Oh, Margaret, Margaret, can you think that any other woman in the world—

MARGARET. (*trembling*) Then—then—

EVERARD. I always have loved you—always—always! But when I found that you—

MARGARET. I see it all! You proposed to Lady Claude—for my sake!

EVERARD. I was so unhappy!

MARGARET. And you *don't* love her? Then I have ruined your life!

EVERARD. It's not too late!

MARGARET. It is—it is! Can we break both their hearts? Oh, Everard—we must be noble!

EVERARD. Poor Lady Claude! I'm afraid I've been very cruel!

MARGARET. And your uncle—think of your uncle! Imagine if he—suspected! The blow to him! No, no, we mustn't, we can't. We must make the sacrifice, Everard! We must do what is right!

(*Leaning against each other.*)

EVERARD. But tell me, at least! You *do* love me?

MARGARET. Oh, Everard, I always have loved you—but I didn't know!

EVERARD. (*desperately*) I don't want to marry Lady Claude!

MARGARET. Nor I your uncle! But we must! They love us, the poor old things!

(*They fall into each other's arms.* MOLLENTRAVE *comes in briskly* L. U. E. *and stares, in utter amazement*)

MOLLEN. (*triumphantly*) Ah! The liberation of two gases, that meet, and explode!

(EVERARD *and* MARGARET *turn, horror-stricken, and rise*)

EVERARD. (*up* R. C. *releasing* MARGARET) Mr. Mollentrave! Oh!!!

MARGARET. (*down* R. *shamefaced*) You mustn't think—oh, you mustn't! We were merely bidding each other good-bye!

MOLLEN. (C.) That of course was evident! But, Everard—for a man who half-an-hour ago proposed to my daughter—

EVERARD. (*miserably*) Mr. Mollentrave!

MOLLEN. Are there many other young ladies—whom you have to say good-bye to, Everard?

EVERARD. Be merciful, sir! Oh, Mr. Mollentrave. I love Margaret! (*going to her*)

MARGARET. (*reproachfully*) Everard!

EVERARD. I do, I do! And she loves me! Oh, Mr. Mollentrave, help us!

(*Both kneel* C. *holding hands*)

MARGARET. Yes, yes, help us!

MOLLEN. What a position for a father! When I think of my Rosamund—the blow to her! And Balsted—poor, doting Balsted!

MARGARET. (*crawling towards* MOLLENTRAVE, *humbly*) We've been very wicked, we know! But we'll do what you tell us!

MOLLEN. (*both rise*) Arise, my children! *I* will befriend you!

EVERARD. (*up* R. C.) Oh, Mr. Mollentrave, you are the noblest of men!

MARGARET. (*down* R. C.) The best, the kindest!

MOLLEN. (C.) (*raising them both*) I will break the dreadful news to them—ah, very gently —We must not be brutal! Not a word to them yet—They must hear it from me!

MARGARET. Yes—oh yes!

MOLLEN. Oh, the cruelty of youth! Go now —go—let me consider what had best be done.

EVERARD. (*seizing his hand and wringing it*) How to thank you!

MARGARET. (*caressing the other hand*) Dear Mr. Mollentrave!

MOLLEN. Whatever it cost me, you have my promise!

(*They go off, hand-in-hand* R. 2 E. *Left alone,* MOLLENTRAVE *laughs quietly to himself, and expresses his supreme satisfaction by a kind of elderly dance.* DEXTER *comes in* R. 2 E. *with a telegram, and stares.*)

DEXTER. (R. C.) Mr. Mollentrave!

MOLLEN. (*with dignity* C.) Dexter, this exhibition of agility may seem undignified, but it is symbolic of a certain inward feeling of legitimate pride.

DEXTER. (*puzzled*) Sir?

MOLLEN. Dexter, I have done it—like that! (*he snaps his fingers*) I waved my wand—and they walked—I piped, and they danced! (*to* DEXTER R. C. *speaking with profound conviction*) Dexter there are moments when my power strikes me as somewhat uncanny....

DEXTER. (R. C.) May I ask, sir—

MOLLEN. No, no, these matters are not for you. —What have you there?

DEXTER. A telegram, sir. The boy is waiting.

(DEXTER *hands him the telegram.*)

MOLLEN. (*fumbling for his glasses*) Yes—a little uncanny! (C.) But—fortunately for mankind, I make a good use of that power! (*He adjusts his spectacles, opens the telegram, and reads*) What, what!

DEXTER. (R. C.) No bad news, sir, I hope?

MOLLEN. (L. C.) (*fuming*) Contareen! The ass, the triple ass! Engaged to Lady Gladys. I am d—— (*going up* C. *and down* R. C.)

DEXTER. Sir?

MOLLEN. And he gloats! He dares to gloat!

DEXTER. (R. C.) Any answer, sir? I have brought a form.

MOLLEN. Answer—no—no answer! Stay, though—there *shall* be—yes, there *shall!* Ah, he gloats, does he, that—moon-calf! Write, Dexter, —write! Sit here and write!

(DEXTER *sits* R. C.)

"Delighted at news. My daughter and Sir Joseph Balsted, who were engaged yesterday"—

DEXTER. (*open-mouthed*) Sir???

MOLLEN. (C. *pettishly*) I say, who were engaged yesterday—"join in congratulations." Have you got it?

DEXTER. Do I understand you to say—

MOLLEN. You do, sir—you do! Is that down?

DEXTER. Yes, sir. "My daughter and Sir Joseph Balsted, who were engaged yesterday, join in congratulations."

MOLLEN. Good. Now take that telegram, give it to the boy—and mind, not a word to anyone here! (*down* L.)

DEXTER. (*going*) Very well, sir. (*is going* R. 2 E.)

MOLLEN. (R. C.) Stay, I had better make sure. Give me the telegram, Dexter—I'll hand it to the boy myself. And do you go off, through that gate, and take the next train back to town.

(DEXTER *crosses* L. C.)

DEXTER. (*up* L. C.) Sir! Don't you trust my discretion?

MOLLEN. (R. C.) Implicitly, Dexter—but I prefer to know it's in London. Go at once, please. I shall let you know when to return.

(DEXTER *goes through the gate,* L. U. E.)

MOLLEN. (C. *and down* L. C.) (*moving off*) More work for my hands! But can I let that creature gloat? (*is going up* R. 3 E.)

(*As he goes, he meets* SIR JOSEPH *and* LADY CLAUDE.)

MOLLEN. (*pushing between them*) Ah, Balsted, Rosamund, wait for me here. I have news —strange news! I shall be back in a moment! (*he goes* R. *3.* E.)

SIR J. (*coming down stage on her* R. *slowly walking down* R. *and across* L. C.) News! Some fresh scheme, no doubt! We have done with him —done! Rosamund, I'll go now to the post-office, and wire my clerk to get a special license—

LADY C. No, no, it's impossible! Oh, Joseph, think of our eternal remorse—if anything happened!

SIR J. Remorse! I tell you, if we stay here, we shall both of us be caught!

LADY C. We should never have lent ourselves to this deception!

SIR J. It's too late now to moan over things! Your father's responsible for it all—let him put things right!

LADY C. Think of poor Margaret! Ninety-nine girls out of a hundred, I said—what if she be the hundredth?

SIR J. I don't care if she be the thousandth! I won't marry her!

LADY C. And Everard! The blow to him! Oh, how can I have been so blind!

SIR J. He and Margaret will console each other!

LADY C. (L.) Oh Joseph, Joseph, they are so young, but youth can know sorrow! Margaret

adores you—and I—oh, what have I done to poor Everard!

SIR J. (L. C.) I don't care, I don't care! I tell you—

(EVERARD *and* MARGARET *come in* R. 2 E. *they start at seeing the others.*)

LADY C. Look, look! Here they are!

(*A panic falls on all four of them; they eye each other furtively, and both pairs stand whispering at opposite corners of the stage.*)

MARGARET. (*down* R. C. *to* EVERARD *down* R.) They've seen us—we can't go back.

LADY C. (*up* L. *to* SIR JOSEPH *up* L. C.) Ah, Joseph! The poor little girl!

EVERARD. (*to* MARGARET) He can't have told them yet!

MARGARET. (*to* EVERARD) Oh no—impossible! But—how sad they are! As though they suspected!

LADY C. (*to* SIR JOSEPH) The poor boy, the poor boy! We must be very gentle!

EVERARD. (*to* MARGARET) I've behaved very cruelly to poor Lady Claude!

SIR J. (*to* LADY CLAUDE) I'm afraid Margaret has been crying—

LADY C. (*to* SIR JOSEPH) It will break her heart when she knows—

EVERARD. (*to* MARGARET) Why not tell them? This is a chance—

MARGARET. (*to* EVERARD) Oh, think of the shock! Your poor uncle! Oh. my heart fails me!

(*They fall into whispers.* MOLLENTRAVE *comes in, and chuckles at finding them all together.*

Both couples start guiltily and try to go, MARGARET *and* EVERARD R. 2. E. SIR JOSEPH *and* LADY CLAUDE L. 2 E.)

MOLLEN. (C.) No, no, don't go—sit down please—I've something to say to you—all!

(*They sit all of them in the greatest embarrassment, avoiding each other's eyes,* MARGARET *and* EVERARD R. *and* R. C. SIR JOSEPH *up* L. C. LADY CLAUDE *down* L.)

MOLLEN. (C.) (*striking an attitude*) The poets have babbled of love since the first introduction of rhyme;—but all that we know, or need know, is that Cupid is—young! (*he turns to* SIR JOSEPH) Balsted! The elderly fisherman baits his fat hook and thinks he has landed the salmon—down below, a barefoot boy wades in, and captures the prize! As a lover, Balsted, you have every quality—every one in the world that appeals to a beautiful girl—every one, with the exception of youth!

MARGARET. (R. C.) (*falling on her knees before* SIR JOSEPH) Forgive me!

SIR J. (*staggered*) Margaret! (*crosses to* R. C.)

MOLLEN. (*down* L. C.) You *must* forgive her! Balsted, it was your brain, your massive brain, that attracted poor Margaret—but to-day, as she sat beside Everard, two pair of lips met, quite by chance—and your brain was forgotten!

(LADY CLAUDE *still sitting* L.)

EVERARD. (*rising* R.) (*appealingly*) Lady Claude!

MOLLEN. (L. C.) Rosamund, you too will pardon, and grant absolution. Rosamund, Balsted,

rise to superior heights—and, from your loftiness, smile on our lovers!

SIR J. (C.) Margaret, you are free!

MARG. (R. C.) What! *Can* you!

SIR J. I release you!

MOLLEN. (*up* L. C.) Go now, my children—leave me—to pour balm on their wounds!

(*He waves them off; they rush out gleefully, hand in hand,* R. 2 E.)

SIR J. (*up* R. C.) A miracle! But how—

MOLLEN. (C.) The infallible working of an undeviating law!

SIR J. Mollentrave, I love your daughter. And she—

LADY C. (*rising and to* L. *of* MOLLEN.) Papa, this will be a disappointment to you, I know. But I—

MOLLEN. (C) Disappointment! The dearest wish of my heart!

SIR J. What!!

MOLLEN. My scheme of schemes, at which I have labored since first I set eyes on our friend! Every single event, all that has happened, was merely the inlay, the minute fragments that dovetailed—and produced this!

SIR J. Marvellous! Mollentrave, I have no words—to express my admiration!

MOLLEN. (*taking* SIR JOSEPH'S *hand and placing it in* LADY CLAUDE'S) After all, my dear fellow, what is it? A little knowledge of human nature!

CURTAIN.

MOLLENTRAVE.

SIR JOSEPH. LADY CLAUDE.

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